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MORE SEVEN

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**RAIN BEFORE SEVEN**



# RAIN BEFORE SEVEN

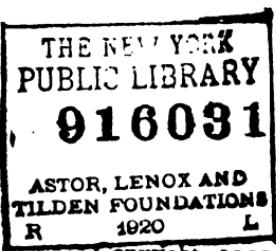
By  
ERIC LEADBITTER

“Rain before seven,  
Fine before eleven.”



George W. Jacobs  
Philadelphia  
Publisher

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“I fancied the geographers must have mislaid the Equator,  
and that in reality it ran through my heart.”

*—Heine.*





**BOOK I**

**The Idle Apprentice**



# Rain Before Seven

## CHAPTER I

### A FOG GETS THE WORST OF IT

(I)

THE day Michael was born, London lay suffocating in one of the yellow fogs of which the newspapers used to boast thirty years ago, but which are almost as rare now as they were then frequent. It had crept unnoticed into the room where the doctor and nurse were helping him to take his first uncertain breaths, so that he filled his lungs with its damp vapor. The fire that was burning brightly in the grate looked warm and cheery; but the fog crept in all the same, and the small iron bed beside the big four-poster looked dim in the flickering light. There was no sound to be heard without, and, in the place where life had come, only the low voices of the two who were with the baby near the fire could be heard, rising and falling in an occasional murmur.

Young Michael was no tremendous adventurer, long awaited with hopes and sickening fears; his entrance was as nearly prosaic as so vital a fact could be. He was the fourth baby who had opened his eyes for the first time surrounded by the angular furniture which Thomas Lawson had bought during his engagement; when, for a moment, he sought an outlet for the art that he felt had until then lain dormant in his soul. The younger children had been sent away for the time; Maud, the eldest girl, alone remaining to

keep the house in order for her father, and to be initiated into the less solemn rites connected with her future destiny. The baby's parents had awaited him undisturbed; neither sentimental nor emotional, they were prepared to accept him rather as an inevitable cause of expense than as a gift from heaven, who should be received with thankfulness and joy. The doctor, as he expanded his chest before the fire, and cautiously jingled the money in his trouser pocket, wished that his patients would always act in such a rational way as had the Lawsons. Indeed, Mr. Lawson, tolerant father of three children, had not even waited at home to hear that the fourth had achieved his entrance with credit, but had left the silent house at the usual hour with a promise to return should he be wanted. There had been no need to send for him; and, when he returned in the evening, it was the sound of his voice in the hall down-stairs that roused the doctor, who was staring vacantly into the fire, and made him realize that his services were no longer required. He crossed the room to glance at his patients; and then, with a satisfied air returned for a few last words with the nurse, whom he considered quite as competent as himself to cope with any eventualities that might arise. Apparently he did not anticipate anything very serious, for, after a few moments, he opened the door quietly, and, with a valedictory nod, went down-stairs.

"Evening, doctor; all well I hope?" asked Mr. Lawson, who was still in the hall.

"Perfectly; and the baby is a healthy little beggar. I congratulate you," replied the doctor optimistically.

Mr. Lawson blew his nose doubtfully, and turned to the dining-room door. "You will have something before you go, I hope?" he said. "You must have had a tiring day."

But the doctor would not; he had other patients to visit, and he explained that, unless he hurried, he would catch it. He promised to look in again, however; and, after jerking

himself into an overcoat, he said good-night, and was swallowed abruptly by the fog as he stepped out of the house.

Left alone, Mr. Lawson blew his nose again, and spied unsuccessfully for his daughter in the dining and drawing-rooms. He found her sitting fidgeting in the study. As he entered, she looked up with an air of relief at the prospect of a companion.

"Well, Maudie girl, what do you think of your young brother?" asked her father, who felt that some such question was expected.

"I don't know," replied Maud uncomfortably. "I'm glad it's a boy, though." She was a tall girl with dark hair and sharp features, that contrasted oddly with the good-natured and rather chubby face of her younger and absent sister Rosie, who was a pretty girl of about thirteen. Maud had chafed at the hushed restraint that had been necessary during the past few days, and felt that the baby had taken rather a mean advantage of her by arriving during the holidays. Now she felt irritable, and, had the other children been at home, there would no doubt have been one of the overwhelming disturbances that from time to time shook the house to its foundations. As it was, she merely frowned at her father's quiet movements, and felt that she would like to spring up and rush wildly about the house.

"I think I will indulge in a cigarette," said Mr. Lawson, with an air of being mildly amused by the queer world in which he lived.

"Why don't you talk to me a little, Dad, instead of starting to smoke directly you come in?" retorted Maud, who always ignored the attempted jocularity in which her father at times indulged.

"Work before play—work before play, you know, my dear," replied Mr. Lawson absently: and, overcoming an inclination to pin him down to an explanation of his oracular

utterance, Maud sighed an appeal for sympathy from an invisible audience.

It was perhaps unfortunate that Mr. Lawson was by disposition so measured; his slowness clashed continually with the ardent natures of his two daughters. When they came in, full of some news that to them was of the greatest interest, he never noticed the hints by which they showed that they were eager to unburden themselves. It seemed to them a distressing thing that, on such occasions, he should smile quietly to himself, and act as if the question at issue was a mere bagatelle. They were not emotional, as the word is usually understood, but, like all young people, they were inclined hurriedly to skim the surface of things in order to grasp what, at first sight, seemed to be the essential points; and they regarded with impatience the more probing movements of their seniors.

The Lawsons always had been a family of some small standing. For several centuries they had been squires of a small village in the Midlands. They were descended from the yeoman stock from which so many of our lesser county families are sprung, and this had stood them in good stead; giving them the stamina to hold their position through trying times, and sufficient obstinacy to pass for determination. Thomas Lawson, the youngest of three sons in an impoverished family, had been in his youth a good deal under the thumb of parents who impressed upon their children the fact that they might well be proud of their family, and who quoted connections long since severed with the younger branches of illustrious houses. When Thomas, at the age of eighteen, announced his intention of entering a bank, his parents deprecated it; but force of circumstance, as felt in a depleted purse, compelled them to yield and obtain for him the influence that he needed in order to enter Bartlett's, one of the best known private banks. He showed no great initiative; but his conscientiousness, and a certain level

ability that he possessed, served in course of time to obtain for him promotion. He rose gradually from the ruck; and, after a crisis which he met with courage and success, was created General Manager of the Bank that he entered originally as a junior clerk more years ago than he cared to count.

When he was thirty-five years old, Thomas Lawson was made manager of an important country branch of Bartlett's, and it was while he was there that he fell in love with the elder daughter of a better-class farmer, and married her in the face of the acrid opposition of his relations. The marriage was, on the whole, a success; but the children of this rather staid couple, curiously enough, all possessed a certain frivolity at which their mother was secretly rather shocked. Her own girlhood had been spent in the quietest way, and she could not understand that children reared among other influences would be different from those of her own childhood.

Young Michael had arrived to find himself a member of a family, none of whom was brilliant, but of which each was resolved to take good care of what their nurse, a former dairymaid at their mother's farm, was accustomed to describe as Number One.

#### (II)

The fog, that had done its best to throttle Michael, lifted during the following night; and Spring, taking courage, entered the dusty streets; so that, as Rosie Lawson stood combing her hair by her dressing-table one morning a fortnight later, the fight was nearly won. It was a glorious morning; the green square opposite the house was alight with mists of dew, and the veiled sun promised heat when once it got to work. Rosie felt tremendously jolly; the sense of sleep-walking that of late had stalked the house had vanished. The ordeal was over; and the children, home

again, were all rising noisily and reluctantly in their rooms. Aunts, dutifully calling, had been received with the effusion that is reserved for unwelcome visitors. The baby had discovered that the lungs which had resisted the fog were capable of more pleasing efforts, and raised his voice querulously but insistently.

It was holiday. Spring, no longer timid, flaunted in the fields and flung its radiance upon the town. Charged with its wine the children were spoiling for a row. Mr. Lawson, even, was affected, and, as he moved gently about the house, hummed unmusically snatches of half-forgotten songs, or blew his nose noisily. In the evenings, his proposals of bridge were defeated by overwhelming majorities, and brainless games were the order; ending more often than not in scrimmages and sulks.

The definitive pat given to her hair, Rosie slipped across the little white bedroom which she jealously guarded as her own, scampered down-stairs with a sound as of a fairy hansom-cab trotting. She was later than usual, and, as she entered the dining-room, a storm of protest greeted her.

"Listen to the animals waiting to be fed; poor things," she said, as she gave her father a passing kiss.

"Morning, Rosie, where is my coffee, I should like to know?" said that thirsty gentleman, slightly mollified by her soft lips.

"Now then—buck up! How much longer are you going to be? We haven't all got as much time as you have," protested Roger, now her eldest brother, as she paused to glance at the letters on her plate.

"All right, my dear, your fond sister is coming—though you might have had sense enough at your time of life to make the coffee, I should think, Maud," answered Rosie undisturbed.

A spring morning, however, is no time for argument; a before long the family were all eating. Little was he

except the clatter of cups and occasional murmurs from Rosie, who was trying to read her letters as she ate a very considerable breakfast.

"You eat enough for a small person, I should say," said Roger, pushing back his chair at nine o'clock, at which time, to his unceasing disgust, he had to start for the office.

"Dad, is Michael going to Harbridge when he is old enough?" suddenly asked Maud, who at that time was a good deal interested in all that concerned boys and their schools.

"What is that? Oh, yes, I dare say, I dare say; but we shall see," answered her father, emerging from the *Morning Post*.

"I wonder what he will be when he grows up," was Maud's next speculation.

"It is early days to be thinking about that," said Mr. Lawson, "and now you must give me a chance to see the news."

"There's nothing like making up your mind in time," observed Maud, to clinch the conversation.

Seated in the train on his way to the city, Mr. Lawson remembered Maud's question, and wondered whether after all she might not be right. "There's a good deal of truth in it," he said to himself. The experience of his own boyhood, and that of his brothers, had shown him that to wait till a boy was old enough to choose his career for himself, very often meant waiting until too late. When he is quite young, the average boy can be trained to accept a career in much the same way as he can be brought to accept a creed. Few boys really can tell for what they are suited; too often the best part of a man's life is spent before he finds its solution. It is far better to decide for a boy, and, if the choice is wrong, allow him to find his own level, than to leave the responsibility upon his own careless shoulders.

So Mr. Lawson set himself to consider the professions that would be open to his youngest son, when the time came for him to adopt one. Roger had always been interested in railways and machinery. When he was younger he used to spend happy hours with a note-book in his hand, recording the names and numbers of the locomotives that he saw at the railway station. It was only natural, therefore, that, after the custom of families, he had been writ engineer and at this time was serving his apprenticeship to a large firm in London. As for the law, there was already a firm of solicitors of which Mrs. Lawson's brother and his two sons were partners; and, as family competition was out of the question, there was no opening there. Banking had been discussed when Roger was small, but Mr. Lawson had come to the conclusion that only an exceptional man (such as himself) was likely to achieve any success in that line, and he had no reason to suppose that Michael would prove to be such a man. There remained the Church, from which Heaven spare his sons; the Government Offices, which he dismissed as too slow; and medicine. On the whole, he liked the idea of one of his sons becoming a doctor. There had been a lot of talk about the profession being overcrowded, but he doubted whether things were as bad as people made out. Even if they were, it was just the reason why there should be good prospects in the future. Those who had turned away from it would leave a gap in the lower ranks, that would be ready to be filled in a few years' time. Yes; Michael should be a doctor. He had visions of Harley Street, and a neat brass plate —

Having thus satisfactorily disposed of his son, Mr. Lawson opened his newspaper, and for the rest of the journey was occupied with the foreign news, in which he took a keen interest.

## CHAPTER II

### A HERO AT GRIPS WITH LIFE

(I)

THERE was no doubt in his own family that Michael was a healthy baby; his measurements from time to time provided food for much complacent comment among his aunts. He abounded in flesh; his weight the nurse avowed phenomenal, and she if any one should have known. His appetite was immense, and his color all that the most devoted of mothers could have desired. But those rare few who observed him with candid eyes when, like a rare *bibelot*, he was divested of his wrappings, felt that his body, or more vulgarly speaking, his stomach was responsible for more weight than the limbs that seemed too long when he lay pink and sodden in his bath. The Lawsons, however, were not critical. Mrs. Lawson was far too normal a mother to notice such a defect or, if she did so, to consider it other than as a sign of future fleetness of limb. Her husband, although he would have been more likely to regard the baby with unbiased eyes, held his son in such dread that nothing would induce him to do more than eye him nervously upon the rare occasions, when for a few moments he was brought into the study. He did not pretend to any paternal stirring of the heart towards the white bundle in the nurse's arms; to see the baby stripped and in his bath would have seemed to him almost indecent, and savoring too much of the spirit-filled bottles that he had once seen in a surgical museum. His daughters, who had seen no other baby in its bath,

thought that Michael represented the standard of masculine infancy.

As the days passed, Michael lost some of his rotundity, but his legs and arms grew little stouter. He himself troubled not at all about such matters; his limbs were sufficient for his needs; and, provided that nourishment was punctually forthcoming, the world was for him a comfortable enough place. It is impossible to say what he thought of it all; indeed it is doubtful if he thought at all. Bright things flashing in his eyes scared him; grotesquely enormous faces suddenly approaching made him uneasy; and always strange sounds were jumbled in his ears. The days swept past like the flashes of light from a revolving beacon. He began to discover that he had a shape. At first he had been swayed merely by a regularly recurring want, that was followed by periods of oblivion when his mind became blank. Now he was beginning to discover that the want was confined to one part of his body; that there were other strange pieces that, moved by some freakish impulse, would wave about in the air, and these he was slowly learning to control. He would hold his hand in front of his nose, and gaze at the small crumpled fingers until some impetus swung the arm away, and forced him to transfer his attention to his toes. Already he had begun to recognize some of the shapes that moved about him, and in them to trace a distant and distorted resemblance to his own person.

Had he only known it, Michael was passing through that period of his life during which his faculties were at their finest pitch; never again would he be so receptive as he was at that time. Daily he observed and adopted new feats of skill, mental and physical, that to an adult would have appeared almost insurmountable in their difficulty. His family were strangely unmoved by his exploits; it is true that the other children were beginning to take more interest in him, but when Roger said "Babies take such an awful

time to grow sensible," he was only voicing what the others dimly felt. As yet, the baby was an individual personality only to his mother and the nurse, who were both engaged in teaching him to talk by making use of a distorted form of speech that, to any one less clever than a baby, appeared unintelligible. To the rest of the family, Michael was a nonentity or a mumbo-jumbo, according to the degree in which he intruded upon their plans.

With daring ease young Michael surmounted all his difficulties. By the time he was three years old, the whole family had accepted him as a human being, and were busy making the best of him. His belief in the miraculous nature of the world was godlike; to him all things were possible, but some were forbidden. Every day the list of such forbidden things grew longer, and the words Obedience, Discipline, and Self-denial coming into his life were considered, not as representing principles, but as names for certain acts which, pleasant in themselves, were bound up with something that was none the less dreadful because it was unknown. His spirit of enterprise developing, he became the uninvited guest at half the conferences between Roger and the girls. In whatever they might be doing, Michael would come stumbling with uncertain feet to take part. After the manner of sisters, Rosie and Maud had begun to torment their small brother; they delighted in calling attention to his struggles at meals or to his clothes, the dirt and untidiness of which were the outcome of inexperience, rather than of actual slovenliness. Their hostility had its foundation in more than a mere spirit of impishness; they considered that he was having a better time than had been allowed to them when they were small, and they thought that it would spoil him. It is a weakness common to everybody that he should grudge others the sweets that he himself has missed. On such occasions, Michael, whose vocabulary was still too limited to be of any real use, grew

dumb with the intensity of his efforts to find the phrases by which he could explain; more often than not he was reduced to tears of despair. Worst of all, the girls met his advances in a way that deeply wounded him, and he had the mortification of hearing the confidences, that to him were of vital and serious importance, retailed to friend and foe alike. It was only occasionally that he knew from a note in the laughter which followed their narration that he had scored; he had no idea in what his cleverness lay, but that did not prevent him laughing, too, with ecstatic pride.

Now and then, among the people who entered and left the house almost unnoticed by him, Michael found one in whom, for a brief but paradisal hour, he recognized a fellow after his heart. He was usually a man far older than Roger, who would begin by setting him on his knee, and end by a grave talk over the treasures in his toy cupboard, or a noisy visit to the garden. These fine spirits never betrayed him, but seemed instinctively to fall in with his mood; and, when questioned afterwards as to what had occurred, would laugh easily, at the same time acknowledging by a glance in his direction the bond between them.

#### (II)

At this time, Michael lived a life that was in reality quite detached from that of the other members of the family. His interests were not theirs; they were debarred from the enchanted world in which he lived by the fact that they were no longer childish. He had been taught to say that he loved his brother and sisters, and when he was small he submitted passively to the latter when, in emotional moments, they fondled him and forced him to undergo a process that he learned to know as "loving."

"Do you love me, baby?" would be the opening question at these times.

"Yes," he would reply, knowing the expected answer.

"Very, very much?" The formula was as regular as the opening to a game of chess. Then he would be engulfed in sisterly arms, and moaned over. He did not know that he thought it unpleasant, because he had not at that time reached an initiative age; he was too busy absorbing new impressions to try and weigh their value. But when these scenes were over, he always felt as if he was relieved from some oppression.

When he reached the age of six, Michael began to organize his attempts upon the citadel of knowledge. He did not wish to do so at all; but, led by an unrelenting sister, he threaded his way among the mazes of the alphabet, and wept when he was not allowed to linger in speculative ease over the intriguing pictures of archers and other folk that adorned the text. Every morning at ten o'clock, the garden or, indeed, any place except the study assumed an enticing aspect, and it was seldom that Michael could be found without a search when it was time for him to begin lessons. Weary hours he spent groping with inky fingers over his copy-book, while Rosie or Maud sat sewing by his side at the table. Now and then, when the work seemed unusually arduous, he would pause and gaze at his task-mistress, wondering what it felt like to be familiar with the mysteries that confronted him. With knowledge at his beck, life lost much of its charm; the curious animal formerly known to him as the empham, became the ephelant, and eventually stood revealed in his reading book as the elephant; truly a disappointing creature. The journeys he made with Rosie lost half their romance when he ceased to believe that they were going to see a Debenham with Three Bodies; even the privilege of being allowed to hold the omnibus tickets tightly in his woolen-gloved hands failed to console him. At the very outset of his life he got into the bad habit of looking forward to the end of the week with its liberty, as if the days upon which he had to do lessons were of no account.

Although he had not many toys, Michael had a very happy time during the day, whatever he may have thought, and his imagination was quite equal to supplying the companions he lacked in the flesh. He personified lead soldiers, and wherever he went was accompanied by an invisible familiar, with whom, from time to time, he compared impressions. More secretly, he nursed at times an old rag-doll that had formerly belonged to Maud. When he was sad he would take it to bed with him, finding comfort in the knowledge of its presence, and lavishing upon it the tenderness that he only aped towards human beings. His mind was at ease whilst he was up and about, but with the evening came a sense of brooding terror. Washed and good in his bed, he felt, while the light still burned, a bodily ecstasy that more often than not made him laugh aloud. As soon as it was dark, however, presences crowded about him. He would implore his nurse to stay with him, or shout for any one whom he heard passing on the stairs to come and say good-night, and, if they seemed in a good humor, to stay and tell him a story.

Like many other children, Michael, during his early childhood, was subject to a recurring dream that, quite commonplace in itself, wrought him to such a pitch of fear that, when he awoke from it, he lay, throbbing and tense; not daring to fall asleep again, and expecting every moment to feel a hand upon his face. He never told any one about it, feeling that to do so would appear cowardly; and, as time passed, the nightmare grew less frequent, until it was almost forgotten. But for a time it cast a dark shadow over his life, and his evenings were spoiled by the dread with which he regarded the approach of bedtime.

When once he was safely tucked into bed, Michael, the lonely pilot of perilous seas, was forgotten. Mrs. Lawson deserted the fireside for a moment every evening in order to give him a benedictory kiss; but, as soon as the ceremony was over, she, too, allowed him to slip out of her mind. No

one thought about his destiny, he was so small; and they could hardly be blamed for postponing to a future date the consideration of his possible career; besides he was to be a doctor. Nevertheless, somewhere in the night those who were to pass through his life, and to influence him for good or ill, were lying asleep in their cots. The girls, who were to make his heart beat quicker by a glance from their bright eyes, were sleepily sucking their thumbs or, handicapped by a later birthday, were toiling up the first slopes of life along which Michael so recently had passed.

## CHAPTER III

### SHORT WORK OF KNICKERBOCKERS

(I)

TIME did not deal kindly with the Lawsons. As the years passed a subtle change was noticeable in their house. It began to be whispered that Mr. Lawson had been unfortunate in his speculations, and that he was not altogether so desirable an acquaintance as he had been formerly. The furniture looked shabby; and where, a few years previously, a chair would have been replaced directly it showed signs of wear, it was now carefully re-covered. The children still lived in much the same way; the girls went to dances, and Michael to his annual round of pantomimes and parties. Nevertheless, the change was felt by them also; where once a brougham had been at their call, the girls had to set out in a cab, or travel by Tube. So slowly had this state of affairs come about, that Mrs. Lawson alone seemed to notice it. She, poor woman, spent many sleepless hours at this time thinking of the future that awaited her children. She lived in an agony of fear lest the girls should not marry; and at times they would look up to see her gazing at them with searching eyes, as if she was trying to estimate the price they would fetch.

Michael, at the age of twelve, was as thin as a rake. His early stoutness had all vanished; and, as he stood in his shirt at night doing anything rather than undress, he was a pitiful sight, with his thin straight legs that seemed to have no contours. Until now, Maud and Rosie had been acting as joint governesses, taking charge of him for alternate weeks. The question of school, however, had been in the air for some

## SHORT WORK OF KNICKERBOCKERS 27

time; and, at length, driven to despair by his nonchalant refusal to work under their authority, the two girls announced that nothing would induce them to teach him any longer.

One evening, soon after his fourteenth birthday, as Michael was sitting fidgeting in front of the fire, Maud came into the room and told him with a broad smile that Mr. Lawson wanted to see him in the study. As he left the room, Michael felt a strange sense of guilt, as if hostile eyes were upon him. And when he entered the study, it was with a sinking heart that he saw no one there except his father.

"Well, Michael," said Mr. Lawson, looking up, "come and sit down. I want to have a talk with you," and, as Michael sidled across to a chair, his father took up a paper that had been lying upon his knee.

"You are getting a big boy now, you know," he said, "and your mother and I have come to the conclusion that it is time you went to school. How would you like that?"

"I don't want to go," answered his son in a hollow voice.

"Nonsense—you know, when Roger was your age, he had been at school for some years; and I am sure that you will be sensible enough not to repeat it, when I tell you that the only thing that has prevented my sending you before this is the heavy expense to which I am put with all you children. However, as I have been able to arrange for you to go to Harbridge at the end of the summer, you will lose no time at a preparatory school, but will go at once where there are boys of your own age. Meanwhile, as I dare say you are not so advanced as the other boys there, you are going to a gentleman I know, who will coach you. He is the Vicar of Sempervale."

"Why can't I stay with Rosie and Maud?" asked Michael, ignoring all side issues.

"You are getting big now, and one day you will have to earn your own living. To do that you must go to school, and learn how to make your way in the world."

"But I don't want to go," and, overcome with the hardness of his lot, Michael broke into a loud wail.

"Well, well—now this won't do, you know," said his father uneasily, and rather taken aback. "I think you had better run off to your mother and talk it over with her."

When once the freshness of the news had worn off, Michael thought little of what his fortune would be when he left home. He knew that purchases were being made for him; indeed, he was taken protesting to be fitted for new suits. For a short time, for the first time since that distant foggy day when first he entered it, he became the centre of the house. If his sisters were sewing, it was certain that they were at work upon his underclothing; did his mother write, it was to hasten the tailor with his suits. But Michael, who had never left home, except for the annual holiday, when it was more as if home was removed for a time to the sea, troubled himself little with the future that seemed so far distant. As the day of departure drew near, Mr. Lawson from time to time tried to explain what Michael must expect to find when he reached Sempervale, and how he must behave in his new surroundings. Roger, who now held a position in a firm of electrical engineers, also unbent so far as to take his young brother up to his room one evening, while he changed before setting out for one of the numerous dinners or dances to which he was invited. To Michael, he was a strange being, all-powerful, from whom familiarity could not be expected. That night, however, Roger was unusually friendly.

"Take a pew on the bed, old chap, while I change," he said, "and I will give you a few tips about what to do when you go to Sempervale. I expect mother has told you a good deal, but there are sure to be some things she hasn't said. How do you feel about it all?"

"I don't know," answered Michael, whose brain was busy absorbing the details of Roger's transformation; the little

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Kropp razor, the pearl studs, and the hundred and one small objects scattered about; all more or less unfamiliar, as he had seldom been allowed to enter the room before. "Do you think Mr. Hargrieves will be strict?" he added, with visions of Maud in her impatient moments.

"I shouldn't think so," answered his brother, parting his hair with mathematical precision. "I haven't seen him, you know; but, from his letters, he seems a decent enough old bird. The thing to do is to please Mrs. Hargrieves; be polite to her, and don't mind running about for her, because, if you keep on her soft side, you will be all right."

"How long am I to be there?" asked Michael.

"Till the end of July, I think," answered Roger, "then you will come to the sea with us as usual."

When Michael left his brother, his mind was full of miscellaneous tags of advice, and he went up to his own bedroom at the top of the house to think about it all. The sight of his new box, corded and locked, brought home to him for the first time the fact that he was leaving home. He realized suddenly how nice they all were; Rosie with her jolly laugh, Maud with her quiet petting, and Roger, good-natured and aloof. He turned to the window with a lump in his throat, and stood with his forehead pressed against the pane, staring out at the misty square with its glimmering lights.

### (II)

Breakfast was a trying meal the morning Michael left; the world had an air of unreality. The very bacon tasted unsubstantial. There was an air of forced gaiety; Rosie piled good things high on his plate, and he had three lumps of sugar in his tea. For once the girls left him in peace and made no attempt to rectify his manners, but when Mrs. Lawson, who had a knack of being tactless with her children, said "Michael, you must not sit like that at Sempervale, you know," all the kindly efforts were undone; and, instead of

the tremulous feeling of a moment before, Michael felt a dull resentment flood his heart. It was a dreary meal. When the cab came, Rosie did her best to talk.

"Now, Michael, remember you've got to be a credit to my teaching, and if there is anything you don't know, say Maud taught you that," she said, giving him a kiss. For a moment he felt hopeless; and flinging himself into her kindly arms, he hid his head on her soft breast.

"Cheer up, old boy," she whispered, "I'm going to send you something you'll like soon." Winning for herself by that moment's sympathy a place in his heart which she was never to lose, and to which his mother never attained.

The last they saw of him was a small white face at the window of the cab as it drove away. When it was out of sight, they entered the house with a feeling of relief, as if the blinds had just been drawn up after a funeral.

When once the train had jolted clear of London, and Michael had said good-bye to his father, who saw him off at the station, he felt very small. There were only four other people in the carriage, but he resented their speculative gaze as they looked at him, and he turned his face to the window. It seemed to him that by doing so he shut them partly out. He got very tired of gazing at the fields, however; and, after a time, fell asleep. When he awoke, an old gentleman opposite him had a tea-basket on his knee.

"Well, young man," he said, "what do you say to having some of my tea?"

"No, thank you," said Michael, who was wise enough to have an instinctive distrust of friendly strangers.

"Nonsense!" said the old gentleman turning purple. "Who ever heard of such a thing? Not want tea, aren't you hungry, hey? Are you too much of a dandy to share my cup? Why, when I was your age I would have jumped, simply jumped at any sort of food—God bless my soul indeed, yes! Now, come and have some, boy."

"Thank you," said Michael, feeling very uncomfortable, and wondering what the other people in the carriage were thinking.

"That's right; God bless me! and I don't suppose you like sugar, or cream or crumpets, do you, boy?—well, suppose you come and sit on this side, and then the tea won't have time to get cold while I pass it across," said the old gentleman, busying himself with the teapot.

"Off to school?" he asked, soon after Michael had settled down; "yes, I know. I know all about it; I went once upon a time, too. Feel a leetle bit down at first? I know; well, well!"

It was not long before Michael told his old friend a great many things; many more than he supposed. Had he happened to look up and catch sight of the face above him with its smile, he would have wondered what he had said, and felt hurt, for he was very earnest just then. But he did not do so; instead, he leaned back against the old chap's big coat, and, encouraged by interested exclamations, told him about his life, until he was interrupted by the train pulling up at a small station.

"Here you are, young man, out you get: who did you say you were going to—Mr. Jacomb?"

"No, Mr. Hargrieves," answered Michael, wondering when he had said anything about it. "Good-bye, I hope you will have a pleasant journey."

"Good-bye, good-bye," jerked out the old gentleman coughing and smiling. "God bless me, you are a queer young customer!"

It was cold on the platform after the warm carriage, and Michael looked about him in a desolate way to see if any one had come to meet him. No one else got out, and the train steamed away before he saw a tall figure coming towards him.

"Be you Master Lawsum, sir?" said this man, who was

middle-aged and dressed in an old tweed suit, with gaiters and a bowler hat. "I was happen coming hereabouts and Mr. Hargrieves axed me to take you up. Be these your traps?"

Outside the station they found a high dog-cart waiting, with the owner's name "Thomas Harrup" painted in white letters across the back. Mr. Harrup put Michael's box under the seat; and, having helped its owner up, laid his whip gently upon the horse's back as a hint that it was time to start.

Mr. Harrup of Crosstrees Farm was a good-natured man, and when the Vicar asked him to meet Michael on his way back from the market town, he readily consented to do so. Now he guessed that the boy beside him, a mere slip of a lad, as he afterwards described him to his wife, was feeling lonely and strange, and he tried to cheer him up by describing the country, promising him new experiences of more value and use than those of the town.

"One of these yer days you must come and do a bit rabberting along wi' me," he said.

"Thank you," said Michael, "I should like to awfully: do you use ferrets?"

"Bless me, yes; we take 'um in a bag," and the farmer launched forth into a description of the sport.

But Michael paid little heed, for he felt tired and empty. The "clop-clop, clop-clop, clip-clip," of the horse's hoofs on the dusty road ran in his head with an irritating rhythm. They swung slowly between the high hedges as the dusk sank on to the fields; he thought he must have been traveling so for many years, when suddenly the trap swept with a wrench into a drive, and Farmer Harrup said, "Here we be, young sir." Michael saw that they were approaching a low house with lights in the windows, and that, not far off, a square church-tower loomed among the trees.

Michael felt stiff and cold as he entered the house, and

almost too tired to answer the cheery good-night that his driver called out as the dog-cart moved off again. But he was relieved to find that he was entering a comfortable hall, and not the gaunt stone corridors he had feared. Mrs. Hargrieves, a woman with a determined manner, took his hat and coat from him.

"The Vicar is in the study; I think he would like to see you, if you are not too tired," she said, and Michael entered the room to which she led him. An immensely tall man, who looked as if he was coiled upon his chair, was sitting smiling at the fire, but he glanced up in a friendly way when the door was opened.

"I thought I heard you come. How did you like Harrup?—a nice fellow, isn't he?" he said and, without waiting for an answer, "Come nearer the fire, won't you? There is plenty of room, and I dare say you are feeling cold after your drive."

Michael, as he sat down, was too confused to do more than stare wide-eyed at the fire, but he gathered an impression of books, crowds of books. As he sat there, he heard for the first time that he was to try for a scholarship at Harbridge at the end of the summer, and that Mr. Hargrieves was to coach him until then.

"Of course there will be a lot of work to get through, Lawson, but I dare say we shall manage it together. However, we won't bother about that to-night; supper will be more to your taste, I dare say. You will have your meals with us, of course, and I hope we shall get on very well together—what do you think?"

As he looked up at the kindly red face, and said, "Yes," Michael felt convinced that, unless he was very much mistaken, they would.

In his bed that night, Michael suddenly remembered the others. The excitement of his arrival, the new impressions, and his fatigue had driven them from his mind. But now

he thought of them, and tried to picture them sitting quietly in the lamplight; Maud and Rosie sewing. It was not of his parents that he thought, but of all the comfortable days that were ended; the small treasures he had left behind him; and Rosie, as he had known her in that last moment, tender and understanding. For the first time since his babyhood, he cried himself to sleep.

## CHAPTER IV

### SEMPERVALE

(I)

SEMPERVALE was a scattered village, half hidden by the woods that stretched down the hills at the foot of which it lay. Coming from these hills, it was the gateway through which a wide undulating valley was entered. The inhabitants, who were few in number, were chiefly of the peasant class, and worked upon the farms near by, or gained their livelihood from the timber. With the exception of the Hargrieves, the only gentlefolk who lived in the village itself were the doctor and his wife, and two elderly ladies who occupied a little square house near the church. Although the village was barely thirty miles from London, the absence of a railway station gave to it an artificial seclusion. The main-road, that lay a few miles distant across the valley, was thronged with motors, but Sempervale was undisturbed by them. No past of historical interest lured the tourist to its leafy retreat, and it was allowed to slumber unseen.

It was not long before Michael became a familiar figure to every one in the village as he went shambling along the road, bent upon some errand for Mrs. Hargrieves or the Vicar, and there were few cottages to which his thin legs did not lead him at one time or another. He was not unhappy in his new surroundings; had he known it, he was probably happier than he had been in the casual and spasmodic home

he had left. Regular hours, and an easy routine gave him the stimulus he needed. In the morning after breakfast, he worked for three hours with the Vicar in the study, after which he was free until three o'clock in the afternoon, when he put in another two hours; the whole of the evening remaining in which to amuse himself, and to do the brief preparation for the next day's work. During his spare time he was usually out-of-doors, nosing about in the wood like a terrier. After tea he waited to see what the Vicar intended to do, because very often at that time they went for a walk together; the Vicar combining duty with pleasure by arranging their route so that it embraced any distant cottages he had to visit.

In some happy way the Vicar completely won the confidence of his pupil; and, instead of shirking these walks, Michael grew to enjoy them more than anything else in his rather uneventful days. Perhaps part of the secret lay in the fact that the Vicar always treated him as an equal on such occasions, and never allowed the faintest trace of amusement to show itself, when it would be likely to offend his companion. The most scatter-brained children have a very serious vein in them, and it is when they are under the influence of it that they are most easily offended; a tactless word will turn the world gray for them then, and cast them into the abysses of sulks. Michael was by no means scatter-brained; if anything he was too serious, and the Vicar, who noticed this, tried to devise a way of making him rely less upon his own company for amusement. But he never allowed a hint of this to pass his lips when he and Michael were out together. They talked about the things they saw, the birds and the farms, and the Vicar would tell Michael about the life the farm-workers led.

What Michael took most interest in at this time was books, for he had only recently discovered the kingdom in them that awaited his conquering. At home, when he read,

he had been unlucky in his choice; no sooner did he get interested in a book than his mother would come and take it from him, saying that it was not a suitable one for him to read. He was not so stupid but that he guessed why it was supposed to be unfit; but he imagined that he was wise in the world and the flesh. He had pored in secret over the encyclopædia in the library at home, and from its technicalities had evolved a peculiar, but fairly accurate theory as to his arrival in the world. He was not vicious, indeed it is doubtful whether he would have been so had he the opportunity; but guileless as he was, he was preyed upon by a natural curiosity. At the Vicarage the library was more satisfactorily arranged than it had been in Jardine Square; the bulk of the books were his for the taking, and those to which he might not have access were placed in the top shelf, where their remoteness saved them from idle hands. The Vicar explained this when Michael first went to Semper-  
vale.

"You can read what you like, Michael," he said, "but I know you will not think that I am talking rubbish when I say that some of these books are not worth reading until you are older; so I have put them at the top, and I shall rely on you not to take them out." That was all, but Michael never felt the least curiosity about them afterwards.

During the summer, Michael read in rather a confused way many excellent things. Gilbert White, Richard Jefferies, Dickens, Thoreau, some Thackeray, Lamb, Jane Austen, he read at this time, skipping here and there, but on the whole reading them pretty thoroughly. Most of what he read he enjoyed, because he found in it something to which he could give no name, but which relieved the pent feeling that from time to time oppressed him; the fact that he did not understand all he read in no way spoiled his enjoyment.

Every Sunday morning when the postman came, he brought Michael a letter from Mrs. Lawson, who told him

all the trivial events that had taken place at home during the previous week; but who omitted the matters of real import; the words and the asides that change the fate of a family.

Mr. Lawson was very secretive about his monetary fortunes, and his children had only the vaguest idea of his income, but at this time Michael, who cared little for such things, knew in an indefinite way that his father was not so well off as he had been in past years. Expense was considered; and, now and again, Mrs. Lawson would say that the children must be careful of their money. For Michael such warnings were of less interest and importance than the things Rosie told him in her letters. She did not write often; but, when she did, she gave him full measure, for she was fond of her small brother. It was she who told him that Maud was "nearly" engaged to be married, and would have been quite, had not Mr. Lawson stubbornly refused to listen to the idea of her marrying a man who was living on an allowance in the Army. Michael learned also that Roger was doing well, and that he often worked half the night in his little laboratory in the garden at something that Rosie described as "smelly but important."

In this way Michael was kept in touch with his family, but home now seemed far less concrete than his life at the Vicarage, and "the others," as they appeared in his letters, had something of the unreality of the characters in the books he read. Children have little difficulty in adapting themselves to new surroundings, and the fact that Michael was so much younger than the rest of the family made him more detached even than the average child. Soon he became quite settled in his new home, and was very happy. He strayed seldom far from the village, for except when he was with Mr. Hargrieves, he lacked the purpose that was necessary to him if he was to cover any great distance. Nor had he a companion of his own age, and a boy if left to himself is apt mentally to wander in circles.

## (II)

The flight of time was almost unobserved at Sempervale; day followed day, and week followed week, without any important event occurring by which to fix the time. In outlying country-places people are apt to measure their time by local happenings rather than by the date. If any one suggests to a villager that the time is passing quickly, it is as likely as not that he will answer, "So 'tis, sure-lie; who would ha' thought it, 'tis five weeks come Friday since the black sow littered," rather than that June is nearly over, or that Trinity Sunday is approaching. The small happenings in the village are of greater importance to the inhabitants than matters of wider interest. In the same way, the harvests and the length of the days are epochs by which the passage of the year is measured. Such an expression as "the days are drawing in," loses its significance in towns, where there is less dependence upon the chances of weather, and where a room may be flooded with light by a turn of the hand. In villages, where artificial light is rarely used, the approach of the dark days is far more noticeable, and is dreaded, for with it the laborer's working hours, and with them his earning powers, are curtailed.

The summer slipped away, and the term of Michael's stay at the Vicarage neared its end. Towards the end of July he reached his fifteenth birthday. It was the first time he had spent the day away from home, and it was a new sensation for him to find a pile of letters on his plate when he came down to breakfast. He was to have a whole holiday, and the Vicar who was driving into Warlingford had promised to take Michael with him. Such drives were rare, and things to look forward to. To sit quietly in the carriage while the country slipped past, and the Vicar talked of a thousand interesting things, was an experience not easy to forget. Perched in the shaky fly, Michael experienced his first taste of power, as he looked down upon the people in

the villages through which they passed. Unsated by too many treats, the prospect of the drive excited him, and he had some difficulty in gulping down his breakfast.

He was just wondering if he could shirk eating any more without being discovered, when Mrs. Hargrieves, who was reading her letters, looked up and said, "How the time does pass! Why, a week to-day Isobel will be home."

"So she will, my dear," answered the Vicar. "It will be very nice to have her here again; she always wakes us up!" and he smiled at the memory of previous holidays.

Michael had heard of Isobel from time to time, and knew that she was the Hargrieves' only child, and that she was at a school near London, but as she was so far away, and he had never seen her, he had thought but little about her. Now that he heard she was coming home, he wondered what she was like; feeling vaguely that she would be an intrusion, and that it would be a great deal nicer if she was not coming.

When they were in the fly together, the Vicar showed that he, too, had been thinking about his daughter, for, suddenly, he said, "It will be nice to have my little girl here again, and I hope you two will be great friends; I dare say you will be glad to have some one else to talk to besides an old fogey like myself." Michael wanted to say that he did not think him a fogey at all, but everything he thought of sounded silly, and he gave up the attempt.

He soon forgot his future companion; there were far too many other things to be considered. When their destination was reached, and he sat in the carriage waiting for the Vicar, he looked too serious to be a normally healthy boy. He would have been as much astonished as hurt, had any one told him that he was rather a young prig. But the effect of being so much alone, or with people older than himself, had been to make him old-fashioned, and rather too much wrapped up in himself. While he was at home the rest of the family found that they were able to get on a

great deal better without him, and usually he had been left to amuse himself as best he could. At the Vicarage his spare hours were seldom spent with a companion, and never with one of his own age. The fact was that he needed something to stir him up; some one who would give him a spiritual shaking to free him from the morbid reserve that was growing upon him.

## (III)

As the date of the examination drew nearer, Michael had to spend more time over his books than had been the case at first. The result was that his midday outing had to be discontinued; and the Vicar, who had no intention of keeping him indoors until four o'clock in the afternoon when work was ended for the day, insisted that his reluctant pupil should get up an hour earlier in the morning, and spend the time before breakfast out-of-doors. Michael had no wish to remain in the house all day; indeed, he never felt so well and fit as he did when he was out in the mornings, but, without considerable goading, he could not be brought to make the initial effort that was required for getting up.

On a fine sunny morning, therefore, a few days after his birthday, he was to be seen at a quarter to seven sitting disconsolately in his bed, hugging his knees with his long arms, and wondering why he should have been chosen to try for a scholarship, when he felt convinced that he had not the ghost of a chance of winning one. He had pointed this out repeatedly in letters that to him seemed unanswerable in their crescendoes of logical objections, but his parents to his despair had refused to treat them seriously; and in answering them had hinted that, although modesty was an undeniable virtue, he could only hope to get on in the world by making the most of his talents.

When once he had faced the first spongeful of cold water, Michael's spirits began to rise, and he suspected that the

world was not such a bad place after all. By the time he had finished buttoning his waistcoat by the window, he was sure of it. He scarcely felt the stairs under his feet as he swooped down them, and in a moment he was out of the house. As he passed through the garden, he saw the gardener bent over a plant; he heard the clamor of the hens in the yard, and the clatter of a pail on the tiled court outside the kitchen-door. The sun was high and golden, and the sky was so profound that its color seemed lost in a veil of pearly light. As he passed across the field towards the woods, he drew in the clean air to the full capacity of his lungs; and, exhilarated by it, he wanted to shout; he felt that one day he would make a big thing of life. Breaking a switch from the hedge, he cut at the thistle-heads as he passed them, hitting with all his force to employ his overflowing vigor. When he turned the corner at the end of the field, he noticed, for the first time, that some one was sitting on the top rail of the stile over which he must climb to enter the wood. With sinking heart, he realized that it was a girl, and that there was no chance of escape. He could not turn back without at once announcing that he was frightened of facing her, and that would be shameful. He slowed down, and wondered what he should do; telling himself that it was absurd to feel so panic-stricken. He knew that a girl from the village would in all probability spring up and be gone before he reached the stile, but he could see that this was no cottager's daughter. She was about sixteen years old, although her self-possessed manner made her look more, and her white silk blouse and tweed skirt had in them a hint of style that was seldom seen in Sempervale. As she sat on the top bar of the gate, displaying a liberal stretch of brown stocking, she showed no disposition to move; and at last when he was only a few yards away, Michael stopped in despair. Suddenly he remembered Isobel, and knew that it must be she; he wondered if he dared speak to her, but he

could not think of anything to say, and his heart beat painfully. He longed for sufficient courage to turn and run. From her airy throne Isobel, for he was right, watched him with delight.

"Well, idiot, what is the matter with you?" she asked.

"Do you—would you mind if I—I want to cross the stile," stammered Michael, a mist before his eyes.

"Why don't you, then?" she retorted.

"But you are in the way—you will have to get down," explained Michael with immense seriousness. Suddenly Isobel laughed; so unrestrainedly that she nearly lost her balance. There was no doubt about it being a friendly and altogether charming laugh; and, without altogether knowing why, Michael felt less embarrassed.

"Come on," said Isobel, recovering from her mirth, and moving to one side, "I suppose you are Michael?"

"Yes, and I knew you too, directly I saw you."

"Is that a compliment? because, if so, I am shocked."

Michael, who did not know in the least what she meant, laughed with a sheepish pretense of sincere amusement.

"Whatever are you doing at this time of the morning?" asked Isobel, continuing her cross-examination. "I suppose Dad makes you get up early for the good of your soul."

"Yes, and I was going for a walk," answered Michael.

"Don't let me stop you," said Isobel, who so far had prevented him coming near the stile by putting out her foot dexterously whenever he tried to do so. After some slight skirmishing, a compromise was arranged; and Michael, instead of walking on, joined Isobel on her perch.

While they sat there, Isobel told him that she had come home late the night before, after he had gone to bed; and that, directly she woke up in the morning, she dressed and rushed out in order to feed the chickens. It was the first time Michael had talked so intimately with any girl except his sisters; and, whenever he could, he watched Isobel's face

with its varying expression, and his eyes followed her dark hair to where it sprang from her round white neck. She, in her turn, was not wasting her thoughts upon the grass at which she was apparently gazing. She knew that he was eyeing her in doubt and admiration, and when he least expected it, swept round upon him and made the most diabolical face. Michael turned bright red with embarrassment; he felt he ought to say something humorous, and so fall in with her mood, but he had not at his command the bantering tone by which he had noticed that Roger was able to simulate an ease he did not feel. Isobel laughed mockingly.

"What a bony thing you are," she said, pinching Michael's arm; "aren't I a cat!"

"No, you aren't," replied Michael, growing still more uncomfortable. "I know I am a fool, but I can't help it," he added, flinging himself on her mercy.

"You are!" laughed Isobel, "and I know you are awfully shocked at my levity, but I am a vulgar young person; so now you know. Come on—breakfast!" she called as, at the sound of a distant bell, she jumped to the ground, and started walking towards the house. Crushed, and in a strange state of unrest, her victim followed her across the field to the door where they found the Vicar.

"Ah!" said Mr. Hargrieves, "you have found each other; that's right," and he smiled as Isobel took his arm, and led him indoors.

"Come on, you wicked old man," she said.

Breakfast over, Michael was banished to the library to work. He lingered over the meal as long as possible, but Isobel's bright eyes saw through his deception.

"Do buck up and clear out, I want to talk," she said, and as he left the room smarting under her sharp tongue, Michael heard again the peal of her laughter.

He went to the library, but not to work. His head was

full of Isobel; and, as he thought how foolish he must have seemed when he was with her, he burned all over. Now that he was alone, he thought of half a dozen excellent parries to her thrusts, but he knew quite well that, when the time came for him to see her again, he would look just as foolish, and answer just as stupidly as he had that morning. How she must scorn him! He writhed—why was he cursed with such an absurd shyness? For the first time, he was beginning to see himself as in a mirror. Isobel's laugh still rang in his ears, and he remembered a dozen pretty graces she had. Her frank and unblushing ways, so unlike his own sensitive diffidence, had won his heart. When the Vicar came in he found Michael less attentive than usual, and reminded him that only a week remained before the examination, and that he would have to work his hardest if he was to put up a good fight.

## CHAPTER V

### A FALL BETWEEN A STILE AND A GATE

(I)

FOR Michael the week that followed was one of mingled gall and sweetness. Isobel led him the wildest of dances; alternately, he throbbed and drooped at her words. He discovered that the love of which he had read was not merely a strange problem about which to ponder in secret, but a living reality that tore his heart-strings. He decided that his was no mere calf love, but one of the rare passions that outlast time itself. His work, as might be expected, suffered proportionately as his infatuation increased. During the last few days, much of his time was spent in revising the work he had done during the earlier part of the summer; and as he sat in the study with his head upon his hands, and knitted brows, he seldom saw the print beneath his nose, but strained his ears for Isobel's piping laugh, or was present at imaginary interviews in which a tamed and adoring Isobel was at last brought to realize his fine qualities.

During this time Isobel, for her part, had plenty to do, fidgeting about in the village or driving out with Mrs. Hargraves to visit those of the Vicar's parishioners who were old or sick. At such times she was a changed Isobel, very different from the droll young person who ruled the Vicarage. She was quiet, and appeared to be rather shy, but now and then the Devil prompted her to say some outrageous thing; or, as she sat in the carriage, to make faces at the boys they passed in the lanes. Nevertheless, she thought of Michael more often than that heroic but despondent gen-

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tleman suspected. His uncouthness tickled her; and in her unruly heart, she had a higher opinion of his rather striking face than she would have admitted. Now and then she devoted a little time to twisting her parents round her thumb.

"What is the Mute doing, Dad?" she would ask.

"Really, Isobel, you must not call him that; I dislike it. He is a very nice young fellow; and if only you would get over your absurd prejudices, you would like him."

"He is like medicine, a sort of animated Beecham's pill; but still, for your sake,"—here she would tweak her father's hair as she stood behind his chair—"I will try and put up with him, especially as he will not be here much longer; thank goodness!"

Then she would dash up-stairs to her room, and smile to herself as she wrote to Gabrielle Mallinson, the girl with whom she was for the moment most intimate. At school, Isobel was almost equally admired, dreaded, and hated. She was admired by all the girls, each of whom envied the ready tongue and daring ways that won her a place in every heart; dreaded by most of them, because they never knew what she would do next, or what confidence she would betray; hated for a few days by those whom she made appear ridiculous.

"Dearest Gabble" (she wrote, with a large quill pen that shrieked in the silent room): "I know I am a pig not to have written before, but I can't help it; so there you are! What is my dear you doing? I am here. I should be awfully dull, if it was not for a deaf mute whom Dad is coaching for an exam. He is fifteen, and an oaf, poor thing. Sometimes I am quite sorry for him; if you could see him sitting at breakfast, trying to think of a bright remark, you would weep. However, he is useful in his way, and I make him run all my errands, so you can imagine this letter being borne swiftly along the lane to the village by him. He is so silly he makes me scream sometimes—oh, dear!"

"I am dying to get back to school again; Dad is so absurd that he nearly drives me crazy; and, if he was not such a dear I think I should elope. I can hear the Mute sedately prancing out of the

study, so I suppose he has learned his A B C properly for to-day, and I will give him this to post. Don't be jealous, my dear, as I don't care a snap for him, he is far too scrubby.

"Your  
"ISOBEL."

The last few days passed so quickly that Michael was in despair; he dreaded saying good-bye to Isobel and wondered if he could possibly persuade her to write to him. He felt that he would never see her again, and wished that some unforeseen tragedy would occur that would give him an opportunity to win her wayward heart. At times he took a morbid pleasure in the sadness of his fate, and pictured himself passing sadly to and fro at Harbridge: a modern Dante, sighing for his Beatrice.

On the last day but one, the Vicar with some hesitation approached his daughter, who was a picture of domesticity as she sat sewing in the garden.

"I want you to do me a favor, old lady," he said.

"Well, Dad, that is all very well, but you are not going to get me to make rash promises."

"My dear, it is not very much. I want you to take Michael off for the day to-morrow, and make him take some exercise. It will do him a lot of good, as I shall not allow him to do any work after to-day, for fear of his getting stale."

"Why can't he go alone? Surely the great baby can take care of himself?"

"It is not that, but he won't make an effort, unless some one is there to stir him up. He is a dear boy, but he is rather slack."

Isobel considered the proposal, as she bit the cotton off at the end of a seam.

"All right," she said, "if mother will let us take lunch, I will take him the walk of his life, but you mustn't expect me to cut the sandwiches, Dad."

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Thankful to have achieved his end so easily, the Vicar promised a palatial lunch. He refrained from saying anything to Michael, because he knew that Isobel liked to manage things for herself.

### (II)

After breakfast next day, Michael trudged off to the study. Never had his work seemed so distasteful; the prospect of leaving the Vicarage was almost more than he could bear. He tried to cheer himself by counting the hours that were left, but they were so few that he only made himself more dismal. Hardly had he settled himself at the table, when the door opened, and, expecting to see the Vicar, he looked up without interest. His heart bounded when he saw Isobel. She came in, and sat on the edge of the table close to him.

"Well, Skin-and-bones, what do you say to a walk?"

"I should like it awfully, but you know quite well I can't come," answered Michael, thinking that she had come merely to torment him.

"Why not?" asked Isobel, patting her dress.

"Because I've got to work, as you very well know."

"All right, spiteful, if you are so sure I won't stay; but, as Dad said you were not going to work to-day, I thought we might go out together."

"Did he really?" asked Michael breathlessly; the world was suddenly golden. The "we" was strangely flattering.

"Yes, of course he did; I'm telling the truth this time, although I am a cat—so, are you coming?"

"Rather—but I had better ask first, I think," he said, still afraid of some diabolical plot.

"Well, buck up, as I'm going to get ready."

A moment afterwards Michael was in his bedroom dragging on his boots. In the room beneath, he could hear Isobel moving. The house seemed alight; his heart was higher

than it had been since the meeting by the stile. Isobel met him in the hall, and he thought she looked more charming than ever. He slung the wallet containing their lunch across his shoulders, and they set out.

At first they were silent, and each wondered of what the other was thinking. They reached the fateful stile, and as Isobel clambered over it, Michael again had a fleeting vision of a brown stocking. As they climbed up-hill through the wood, he felt full of joy. Isobel walked buoyantly; she looked as fresh as morning, but, from time to time she murmured at the heat. When they reached the top of the hill, and the trees were more scattered, the path ended in a lane with high flowery hedges. As they entered it, Michael turned and caught a glimpse through the trees of the village far below. A short way down the lane they came to a gate; and Isobel, who reached it first, tried to open it, but one of the hinges had given, and she was unable to move it. They lifted it together, and, as it gave, Michael stumbled against her. For a moment they stood looking into each other's eyes. The question rushed through his brain: dare he kiss her, or would she be indignant? Before he quite realized what was happening, their lips were together, and he was trembling violently. Isobel, flushed but smiling, drew back her head.

"Put your arms round me, Goose!" she said, and, as he fumbled with unaccustomed hands, she flung her arms about him, and he felt her strong young body strain to him.

When they turned to move on again, Michael's mind was in a whirl. "She is fond of me," he kept saying to himself as if he had long suspected it; but at the same time he felt strangely upset. Isobel's undisturbed gait brought him to himself, and he found that his tongue was no longer tied.

They passed for several miles along the ridge of the hills that skirted the valley in which Sempervale lay. The lower slopes lay in the sunlight, and the bright green was almost

dazzling, except, here and there, where the corn encroached upon the hills, but the heights were mostly wooded. The first freshness of morning had worn off, and beneath the trees it was heavy and close, so that the scattered clearings, with their stirring breezes, were grateful. But a glimpse of the open fields, and the chalk-white road running through their midst, was sufficient to drive them back when they ventured downwards. They walked all the morning with short breaks, during which Isobel sat down on a fallen log; while Michael, driven away from her side, explored the wood. As they got further from Sempervale, the hills were less high, and the trees became more dense. They walked side by side, and Isobel described her life at school. She spoke of Gabrielle.

"She is my best friend—I like her better than any one else in the world, though she is rather a noodle really."

"Better than any one?" asked Michael, angling for an unlikely morsel of tenderness.

"Of course, do get on. If you turn your silly face round like that you will trip over something in a minute."

"But you do like me a little, don't you?" he asked, driven into the open.

"Well, I'm not so sure about that. At any rate, I should like you a good deal more if you were not such an oaf, and if you could talk about something more interesting than all the rubbishy books you have read."

"If only you would say what you wanted me to talk about, I would do so fast enough, but you sniff at everything I say."

"Poor old thing! talk about me, then," said Isobel.

"All right, but what shall I say?"

"My dear dotty-one, I really can't teach you how to talk; it's far too hot, thanks."

Michael felt that very little more would make him burst into tears. He felt sore and miserable; but the fear of los-

ing every chance he had of winning Isobel's respect helped him to keep his head up and walk along in silence, since he was too weak for words.

Soon after midday they reached the place where Isobel had decided that they should have lunch. Such matters had been left to her; for, in his solitary rambles, Michael had seldom walked far. He had usually contented himself with finding a comfortable place to sit and dream, that was within easy reach of home. But Isobel, to whom the hills were as familiar as her garden, knew of a place that on such a day was a paradise of birds and cool shadows. Half-way down the hills there was a little plateau cradled in the woods, where lay a pool into which a small stream rippled over a miniature waterfall. There they settled under a large beech-tree, and, as they sat in silence, the murmur of the brook and the soft crooning of wood pigeons made music in their ears. Isobel, a slip of grass in her mouth and her hair over her eyes, was the incarnation of lazy mischief. She leaned comfortably against the tree while Michael, still heated with the walk, lay first on one elbow, and then on his back with his knees thrust upwards, trying to find a comfortable position. They ate their lunch languidly, with many murmurs from Isobel, who said that she was too sleepy to open her mouth when she had gathered sufficient energy to carry a sandwich to it. When they had finished, they sat almost silent for a time. A few flies danced in the air above their head, and once a rabbit bent on some strange emprise hobbled across the clearing and paused to eye them. It was utterly still. Gradually, and unnoticed, their energy flowed back. Isobel, the restless one, was the first to stir.

"I'm going to paddle in the brook," she announced, sitting up and tossing the hair from her eyes.

"Yes, let's," said Michael, suddenly discovering that he was tired of sitting still. Isobel began to unlace a shoe.

"If you are shocked, you can look the other way," she

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said, putting out the tip of her tongue and gurgling with laughter.

"I dare say I can bear it," said Michael, and felt that unthinkingly he had said the right thing and gained a step.

In a few moments they were in the stream. Isobel jumped down the waterfall and uttered a little cry of anguish.

"Oh, I've hurt my poor toes—come on, you bony thing," she said.

Michael was glad when the water hid his thin legs. They waded round the pond until they reached a clump of reeds, which Isobel announced to be all prickles. "I'm going across," she said, "you can go on if you like."

"You can't," said Michael, "it's far too deep."

"Don't you believe it!"

"All right, don't blame me if you get wet."

"Little boys should be seen and not heard," Isobel returned, gathering her skirts outrageously high. She was soon in so deep that it seemed impossible for her to raise them any more.

"Hold your breath, Bony," she cried. "I *must* do it."

In a moment the water grew shallower, and she skipped up the bank and flung herself delightedly on the ground. Michael stood over her while she sat twiddling her toes.

"Isn't it nearly time to be going?" he asked.

"All right, give me a hand," and she jumped up.

The warm air had almost dried their feet by the time they regained the tree, and sat down to put on their shoes and stockings.

"Now, be a good Bony," said Isobel, "and do up my shoes for me."

As he tied the laces, Michael's fingers thrilled. He had never dared to dream of such bliss as that day had been. Already he had forgotten the snubs, and was unconsciously at work magnifying the happier moments. He tied the last

shoe, and looked round. How sweet and near her face was! He tried to kiss her again, but she made a little *move* and slipped back upon her elbows.

As they came down the lane above the village, the sun was low in the west. It was still quite light, but the day was chastened, and freshness was stealing again across the world. The church-clock chimed in the valley, and the sound seemed to come from very far away. They were tired and happy, and Isobel swung her shady hat in her hand as she walked. Now and then she hummed little snatches. When they reached the gate Michael stopped.

"Give me one more," he said. "You know I am going to-morrow and perhaps I shall never see you again."

"Oh, what a tragedy!" moaned Isobel, imitating his voice. "Well, if you are very good." This time his arms were more sure, and he held her to him so that her heart struggled against his.

"Who says boys cannot love!" he said exultantly in his heart. When he released her, Isobel took his face between her hands and drew it down to hers.

"If you say a word about this, I will never speak to you again," she said. Incidentally, she omitted to mention the expedition when she next wrote to Gabrielle Mallinson.

As he leaned from his window that night after he had gone to bed, the stars seemed to Michael very friendly and bright. "What a splendid thing life is," he murmured to himself. Suddenly he remembered the examination.

## CHAPTER VI

### TWO AND A THIRD

(I)

THE scholarships at Harbridge were of considerable value, and there were always a large number of candidates for any that became vacant. But as the school was situated in the Midlands, and drew the greater number of its boys from Lancashire and from the North, the entries in London were not usually very numerous. The year that Michael sat, there were only eight boys besides himself, and the examination was held in the Temple; in a room upon the glass doors of which the name of the last occupant still remained. The boys sat at wide intervals round a broad table covered with green baize, and the two men who were supervising the work walked slowly round the table, or sat in chairs at either end of it.

Michael wasted some precious minutes by looking first at one and then another of the white-faced boys, each of whom had been sent, very much like a fattened-up pig, in his best clothes, to see what he could make of the half-unintelligible knowledge that had been crammed into him for the occasion. They were of absorbing interest to Michael, for some of them would in all probability be his future companions. It was not until most of the other boys had settled down to the contemplation of their papers, that he realized how he was neglecting his own.

At first he thought he could make nothing of it, but gradually he warmed to his work, and the morning slipped quickly past as he wrote feverishly. At one o'clock work ended for the morning, and the boys streamed out of the room, leaving the two masters gathering up the papers. At the top of the

stairs they hung about self-consciously ; jostled by the clerks hurrying along the corridors. None of the boys seemed to know what he was going to do. A fat boy in an Eton-suit came over to Michael, and proposed that they should have lunch together. Michael agreed readily and they went off to a Lyons' shop, which the fat boy said his brother had told him to be the right sort of place for a cheap lunch. As they sat eating sandwiches, they talked about the work they had just done, and about Harbridge. The fat boy, whose name was Oakley, had been to a preparatory school, where it appeared that he had distinguished himself in various vague ways, and he looked down correspondingly on Michael, who, however, in return was able to quote a brother who had been actually at Harbridge, which Oakley was unable to do.

When he returned in the afternoon to the examination room, Michael found that at the beginning of each paper he felt shaky, but that after this first hesitation he got on better, and at the end of the day he felt that he had not done badly. The other boys all complained how badly they had done, asserting loudly that the papers were rotten, and fairly crawling with catches, and he thought it politic to join in the general jeremiad. He traveled home on the Underground, and as it was almost the first hint of freedom he had enjoyed, he was deeply interested in everything.

The hurrying crowd thrilled him, and in the carriages all the girls and young men seemed to be smiling at each other, as if in response to an universal League of Youth. He thought it was all delightful, and determined that when he was older he would live in London. He wondered how he could ever have grown tired of it, and then realized that until then he had never really seen it.

When he reached home, there was a letter waiting for him in the Vicar's handwriting, which made his heart beat. Isobel's presence suddenly flooded his spirit, and he took the letter up to his room hoping to find in it a message, or pos-

sibly even an enclosure, from her. He read the letter through twice, lingering over the firm handwriting, as if he suspected it of keeping something back from him. It ran thus:

“THE VICARAGE,  
“SEMPERVALE.

“MY DEAR MICHAEL,

“I hope that by the time this reaches you, the worst will be over, and that you will have finished successfully your first day's work.

“I find that it will be necessary for me to be in town on Saturday to attend to some business, and I was wondering if you would care to come to luncheon with me, at my club. A friend of yours will be there who also hopes to see you. A line here will reach me before I start, if you post it by return.

“Do not forget to rub up your notes on 'construction'; and if you have any spare time, you could employ it profitably in brushing up your irregular verbs. Do not, however, try to do too much during the evenings.

“Well, God bless you my dear boy, and good luck; and believe me,

“Very warmly yours,  
“RICHARD HARGRIEVES.”

Michael ignored the advice about his work as being beside the issue, and concentrated his mind on the friend of his whom the Vicar mentioned. Who could it be but Isobel? He wondered that she sent no message, but he knew that her methods were incomprehensible, and that he must not expect too much.

During the evenings, Michael was made much of by his family, who questioned him about his progress during the day. After dinner they usually played games, so that the weary scholar should not overtax his brain. Roger was absent, as he was now working in Birmingham, where he had obtained a position of some importance, but the two girls, who were both at home, were very jolly. One evening, when half a dozen other young people came in, Mr. Lawson

was forced to read a domestic Riot Act for the benefit of the neighbors. Altogether it was a very happy time, and Michael decided that examinations were not half bad after all. He wrote accepting the Vicar's invitation, and awaited the appointed day with impatience.

## (II)

While Michael was waiting in the vestibule of the Clergy Club, he was seized with terror, and wished that he had refused to come. He was overcome by the austerity of the attendants, and felt that as they stood about him they were criticizing his appearance. A messenger went to find Mr. Hargrieves, and his monotonous call could be heard at intervals. He almost decided to bolt, and leave the Vicar in the lurch, but he had not the courage to run the gauntlet of so many eyes. The examination had not been nearly so trying as this day, to which he had looked forward with such impatience. He looked out of the window and envied the people who were passing in the street, free to do as they liked. As he stood there, he felt a hand upon his shoulder, and heard Mr. Hargrieves speaking to him.

"Well, Michael, how are you? How did the exam go off?" and, after Michael had mumbled something in return, the Vicar continued, "We must hear all about it later on; but now suppose we have a wash, and then go to the smoking-room till lunch is ready?"

They passed through so many rooms, that Michael wondered for what purpose they could all be intended. When they entered the smoking-room he looked anxiously round for Isobel, and was quite unprepared for the voice that greeted him.

"God bless me, how you have grown, young man! I suppose you have forgotten all about me?" It was the old gentleman of the railway carriage, who was tremendously pleased at Michael's obvious astonishment.

"You thought you had got rid of me for good, eh?" he said; and Michael, deeply disappointed at the absence of Isobel, hardly knew what to reply, but he soon cheered up and described his experiences at the examination.

"What a lot you young sparks do know nowadays," said the old gentleman, whose name was Mr. Chesters, and who was not too old to enjoy a glass of whisky while they were at lunch. "Why, when I was a boy it would have been considered unhealthy."

"There is only one thing I do not like," said the Vicar. "I should feel more easy if you thought you had made more of a hash of things; it sounds funny, but exams are funny things."

Michael, however, was very little damped, and told his two sympathetic listeners a great deal about himself, and asked almost as much about the club. He wanted to know how it was that Mr. Chesters was there.

"Lord bless me! I have known your good tutor since I was at school," said that gentleman, "and mind you," he continued, holding Michael's attention with a forefinger while he wheezed, "a more idle chap there never was. That is my belief," he added, and drank a gulp of coffee with an air of being willing to allow people to disagree, but of having a poor opinion of them if they did. Then he winked a bright eye at the Vicar.

"I will tell you what, young feller," he continued addressing Michael, who was deep in a large easy chair, "if you stay here in all this smoke, you will never grow. What do you say to going out? I dare say you are too much of a dandy to care two pins about the Tower and the Zoo, and so on, hey?"

Michael, who was longing to move, protested. Like many London-bred boys, he had never seen the sights; and apart from rare visits to his father's office when he was small, had seldom been east of Trafalgar Square. Mr. Chesters, who

was only too glad of an excuse to do what he would have lacked courage for alone, finished his coffee.

As they sped from place to place, he pointed out the sights to Michael, and told him blood-curdling stories about the streets through which they passed. Now and then the Vicar expostulated mildly, but without the slightest effect.

They had tea at the Zoo, where Mr. Chesters was fascinated so greatly by the inmates of the ape-house that he had to be led out like a refractory small boy. He bribed the keepers to take them behind the scenes, where there was a whole world unknown to the casual visitor. It appeared that he was a Fellow, and, although he declared more than once, "God bless me, it is many a long year since I have been here," his face seemed in the circumstances to be strangely familiar to the keepers.

While they were having tea, the Vicar told him that Michael was to be a doctor.

"Well, I am sorry to hear it," said Mr. Chesters. "I would as soon be a butcher, and mark me, you will regret it." Michael, who was deciding which cake looked most tempting, did not notice the Vicar's slight frown.

"Not that there are no doctors who are decent bodies," continued Mr. Chesters, who did see it, stirring his tea with a judicial air, "but no quackery, mind you!"

"Of course I shan't be a quack! Why, they are not doctors at all really, you know, they never have English degrees, even if they have any at all," said Michael, feeling that the conversation was rather childish.

"Oh, well, of course, that is different," said Mr. Chesters, coughing loudly. "Confound these damned cakes—pardon, Hargrieves, but my gullet is not what it used to be."

After tea they took Michael home in a taxi, and as he said good-bye at the door, Mr. Chesters gave him some final words of advice.

"Keep a stiff upper-lip, my boy, and whenever you are in

doubt hit first and think afterwards. You will do very well, I have no doubt, but if ever you get into a hole, as even the best of us do one day or another, don't write home, but come and see me. Keep on as you are, and you will be a man before your mother yet."

When the cab drove off, Michael felt lonely, and Mr. Chesters' words, while making him laugh, touched him. He had no idea where his old friend lived, but he knew that he could easily find him through the Vicar, and the knowledge that he would be there if he was needed was comforting.

### (III)

On the following Wednesday the Lawsons left town for their annual holiday at the sea. Their destination was every year a question that took the whole family several months to decide. About the beginning of May, one of the girls would say she wondered where they would go that year; after which the matter would be left to germinate for a month. When June came in, Mrs. Lawson would say that really the time was flying, and they would have to decide soon, and that they must try and find a quiet place.

It was not merely a question of finding a new place to which they might go; the peculiarities of each member of the family had to be consulted. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that they had to be avoided, to be dodged; as the time grew shorter, to be howled down.

"What do you say to Lynton?" one of the girls would ask, looking up from a book which, for the sum of sixpence, undertook to suggest innumerable places, each combining every possible excellence. Mr. Lawson, who disliked the idea, would suggest that it was relaxing.

"Well then, Port Isaac?"

"Good Lord, why, there is no golf," from Roger.

"And there is no bathing worth having," from Michael, bent on exercising his one talent.

"Well, do settle it. Let's blindfold Dad and make him open Bradshaw, and put his finger on a name as they used to do with Bibles, and go there."

"Yes, and pick Grimsby. You are talking rubbish, Sister Ann."

"I don't mind where I go."

"Nor do I."

"Well, how about Cromer?"

"It's far too big now."

So the discussion would continue, seemingly without hope of issue. Finally, at the last moment, the place first thought of would be fixed upon, and in spite of insuperable disadvantages they all would have a very good time, when once they had found rooms.

This year Michael was spared this question, which had been settled in favor of Mineford while he was at Semper-vale. The result of the examination was not to be published for three weeks, and the term at Harbridge did not commence until a fortnight after that; meanwhile he determined to put the whole matter out of his mind, which he had no difficulty in doing. Where Isobel was concerned, this policy of oblivion was not so easy to carry out. While the excitement of the examination lasted, he had been happy enough, but now that it was over he was possessed by the thought of her. He tried to banish her image from his mind by endless practice at the piano, in which he was beginning to take an interest. Since he was quite small he had enjoyed strumming, but he had been inclined to shirk the work necessary before it was possible to play well. Now he put himself under the direction of Rosie, who was able to give him plenty to do, for although he played well for his age, his technique was chaotic.

Michael's efforts were unavailing, constantly his thoughts recurred to Isobel: Isobel smiling provokingly, stamping her foot at his obtuseness; and, above all, Isobel ardent in his

arms. He had never asked her to write to him after all. The determination, so diffidently arrived at, had vanished from his mind when the opportunity came for it to be put in practice. He wondered if he could write to her. At first there seemed to be difficulties, but, as he considered them, they diminished until he wondered why he had ever hesitated. He wrote to her in the privacy of his bedroom, using the wash-stand as a table; the jugs about his knees. When the letter was posted, he wondered if Isobel would understand; and, burning, he imagined her laughing over it with the girls at school.

For the rest of the time before the Lawsons went to Mineford, Michael was in a fever of impatience. He recognized the postman's knock at doors half-way down the Square, and by the time it reached their own he was almost in palpitations. As the days passed without bringing him an answer, he grew sick with anxiety. At last, the morning they were leaving town, a parcel came for him by the first post. Luckily he was down early and was able to evade questions by taking it to his room unseen. It was very light. His fingers trembled as he cut the string, and his heart was beating like a drum. The box contained a mass of roses, among which was a slip of paper with a few words written on it. "I picked these this morning, Isobel." He kissed it ecstatically, and packed the wretched flowers in his box.

At Mineford, Michael's heart grew lighter. The Lawsons were a small party; for Roger, a host in himself, was unable to come. Maud was now quite engaged, and usually disappeared with her fiancé, a very correct and sleek young man who never knew what to say to Michael. The result was that Rosie and her young brother were thrown a good deal into each other's company. They got on famously. At half-past seven in the morning she would bang on his door.

"Are you coming to bathe, Michael, Michael, Michael?"  
"All right, Rosie; half a sec. I will catch you up."

They would eat the biscuit insisted upon by Mrs. Lawson as an unfailing protection from all the perils of the deep, and then race each other down to the little coomb where the bathing tents stood. After they came out of the water, they loitered about in the sun while Rosie dried her hair, or ran races to get warm. There were very few people in the place, and the young men who were moping at more fashionable resorts lost more than they knew by not seeing Rosie at these times. She was as fresh as the morning, and her laughter was so jolly that it always made Michael roar in sympathy. He, too, might have won more kindness from Isobel, had she seen him with a towel round his neck, and unruly hair. But he got on very well without her, although he often looked at the slip of paper on which was her writing, and every night when he went to bed put her flowers in water.

The Lawsons spent the evenings on the front. Michael and Rosie together; or, if they could persuade him to come, with Mr. Lawson whom they led about like a tame bear. He thoroughly enjoyed pretending to be young, but Mrs. Lawson would never leave the house, and he usually went back before long to see how she was getting on.

When they had been at Mineford a few days, they discovered that a family they knew were staying there too. They had never been particularly intimate in town, but in a small seaside place it is difficult to maintain an attitude of neutrality, and now they were as thick as thieves.

The Somertons were five in number. Mr. Somerton, a prosperous solicitor, spent most of his time on the golf-links, to which he drove every morning, only returning in the evening in time for supper. Mrs. Somerton, a quiet woman in the later middle ages who was addicted to tatting, sat on the shore with Mrs. Lawson, while her children, Anne, Joan, and Nick were always to be found with Rosie and Michael.

Anne Somerton, who was about eighteen years old, was

not so much in her element as the others, for she had slightly exalted notions of her own importance. Joan and Nick, however, were always ready for any extravagant plan gravely proposed by Rosie, who was never so happy as when she was engaged upon some madcap enterprise. Joan was twelve, and Michael from the height of his three years' majority rather looked down upon her. She was a quiet little thing with a wholly honest expression. From the first she was devoted to Michael, whose rather spasmodic performances upon the guitar-like piano in the lodgings were to her entirely wonderful. She was far too reserved to show how she idolized him, and the others, who regarded her as the baby of the party, never thought of suspecting such a thing. Michael, who, had he known the place he held in her heart, would probably have regarded her with greater favor, was constantly wounding her by disregarding her suggestions, and appealing to Anne and Nick. But it would have needed a far more sentimental damsel than Joan to have been sad for long, at such a jolly place in such jolly company.

With the superficial attitude of youth, the young people accepted each other as companions of the moment, without troubling to pry into the future. It is true that they made plans for meeting when they returned to London, but the probability that such schemes would come to nothing did not greatly upset them. Upon leaving the sea, each family would scatter; the boys would go to school, and the girls to stay with friends, where they would meet charming and ineligible young men with whom to wonder what to do, so that it well might be many months before chance and time drew them all together again. When that happened, the memories of Mineford would have grown dim, and their former intimacy seem unreal. No one saw an omen of future things in the friendship that sprang up at Mineford between the two families. The time was not ripe for Fortune

to disclose the part each one day was to play in the life of the other; for many years were first to elapse.

## (IV)

One day when they had been at Mineford about three weeks, Michael came in from bathing full of his achievement in swimming round a boat anchored in the bay, at which he had long cast envious eyes, but until then never reached. He poured forth the story of his victory, but upon heedless ears; and, as his periods were received in silence by his parents, he wondered what could be the matter and gradually quieted down. After breakfast that day the Lawson and Somerton children had arranged to walk to Whitesands, a small bay distant a few miles, where they were to bathe and play hockey on the sand. There was therefore considerable commotion as breakfast drew near its end; Maud and Rosie wondering whether their bathing things were dry yet and the Somertons heralding their arrival by shouts from the garden below. While all this was going on, Mrs. Lawson drew Michael into the hall.

“Dad has had a letter from Harbridge.”

“Oh—what has happened?—I had forgotten all about it.”

“My poor boy, you have not succeeded. They have not given you a scholarship, but they will allow you to enter in the ordinary way, and without an entrance exam.”

“I’m afraid Dad won’t like it.”

“Of course it will be a great deal more expense now—when you are at school,” and, seeing that Michael looked downcast, his mother tried to administer spiritual comfort. “You must try not to be too disappointed; it shows that something else—something better is reserved for you,” conveying nothing to her son, except a dim wonder as to what better thing he was to have, and the faint hope that it might prove to be a bicycle.

He was right in guessing that his father would be more

disappointed than himself. Mr. Lawson had counted a good deal on a scholarship reducing the cost of Michael's schooling by eighty or even a hundred pounds a year, and now that he had to face it without any relief at all he was a good deal upset. He was determined that if he could not afford to send his sons to the 'Varsity, they should at any rate have the benefits of a public-school education. He knew how much greater the necessity of such an education was becoming every year. Few could hope to be free of the company of gentlemen, who had not behind them a career, however smirched, at one of the great public schools. To miss the 'Varsity was unfortunate, but to lack good schooling was unqualified damnation. As each year passed, the secondary schools and those would-be public schools which sprang up like mushrooms everywhere, poured out an increasing number of young men destined for the routine work of an office; who, although in themselves good fellows, were nevertheless all marked with the stigma of bad breeding; mostly loud of voice and erratic in their use of aspirates. The mere presence of this army tended to bind their more fortunate fellows together in an unspoken, often unfelt, but always very real bond. However much it might cost him, he was determined that Michael should go to Harbridge. He stood looking out upon the sunny sea, and wondered why it was that after spending the greater part of his life in conscientious and honorable work, the ease to which his labors entitled him should be withdrawn at the time when he was beginning most to need it.

Far away on the path up the cliffs at the end of the bay Michael, a dot in a moving group of dots, was racing Rosie up the slope, while Joan smiling happily was clambering slowly behind them with the others.

## CHAPTER VII

### AN ANCIENT FOUNDATION

(I)

THE town of Harbridge lay in a hollow formed by the hills among which a sluggish river wound its way. Largely composed of the black-and-white timbered houses that are so irresistible to American visitors, it seemed to have abandoned all effort to keep pace with time several generations previously. The school, which was about two miles away, was regarded by the inhabitants in much the same way as a colony of bees is supposed to be by brown bears; it was looked upon as a rich prey, to rob which circumspection was needed. Upon six days in the year the browsing tourist was awakened from his peaceful dreams among the gabled houses by the clatter of many cabs and wagonettes. On the first and last day of each term every presentable vehicle in the town was dragged from its hiding-place to spend many hours rattling to and from the school; its dusty seats crowded with glorious life.

The "Schools," as they were known locally, had originally been situated in the town, and had only been moved to new quarters when they had outgrown their accommodation, some years before. The new school buildings, a block of pleasant-looking houses grouped together near the river, formed a striking contrast to the old house that had echoed to the sturdy cat-calls of a previous generation. When Dr. Lowe had been appointed head-master at the close of the long rule of a somnolent predecessor he realized that drastic

alterations in the curriculum were needed if the school was to retain the high place that for three centuries it had assumed as a right. Chief among his proposals was one for the erection of science-rooms, in order that the school might cater for the growing demand for that subject. The majority of the house-masters, who were mostly contemporaries of his predecessor, condemned his project in no measured terms; and, by carrying it to fulfilment, he found that he had raised a solid wall of prejudice against himself. Policy demanded that this feud should be allowed to smoulder rather than blaze unchecked, but after ten years Dr. Lowe knew that in the critical moments, which must arise in the life of every school, the loyalty of his colleagues was to the traditions of the place rather than to himself.

When Michael arrived at Harbridge Station, he was met by the school "John," whose duty it was on such occasions to look out for new boys and pack them into cabs. As Michael was jolted through the town, he stared hungrily at the lighted shops with a sinking sensation in his stomach; feeling more as if he was on his way to eternal isolation in a monastery, than to Lakins, the boarding house at which Roger had been, and the praises of which he was never tired of singing. The cab bumped over the rough streets of the little town, and was swallowed by the darkness of the country lanes. There was another cab not far in front, and Michael wondered who was in it. Every now and then they passed boys who preferred to walk, leaving their luggage to follow on the school lorry. It was pitch dark outside, and nothing could be seen, except an occasional tall shadow as the cab passed a tree by the roadside. The cab was lighted only by the two lamps at its sides; and, leaning back against the slippery leather cushions, Michael could see through the little windows in front the old greenish coat of the driver, and the leather edging of the rug that was round his waist.

After a long time they began to climb upwards, and then

the crunch of the horse's hoofs showed that they were upon gravel. The brake was put on with a loud creak; and, in another moment, Michael was blinking at his house-master, and trying to accustom his eyes to the glare of the light in the house.

Mr. Lakin was a spare man with grayish hair and an extraordinarily penetrating gaze, the effect of which was increased by a deep vertical line between his eyes. His unwinking glare was famous throughout the school where he was known as Fish-Eye, and, overcome by it, the most daring reprobates had been known to confess before he said a word. Nevertheless he could be very pleasant when he chose, and he had won a place in the heart of almost every boy who had been in his house, although he was eyed with suspicion by the rest of the school.

"I am glad to see you, Lawson," he said, "and I hope we shall get on as well as your brother and I did. Usually I have a chat with new boys, but I dare say Roger has told you all that is necessary, so I will not keep you now. The life here may seem strange at first, but I have no doubt you will soon get into our ways."

Half an hour later, after an interview with the matron, Michael found himself in a small cubicle, the greater part of which was taken up by a large basket-chair and a table. Huddled together at one side were three desks, each with a windsor-chair in front of it. This cell he knew in future as Study Number Ten, and one of the desks and a chair with three legs became, from that night, his possessions so long as he remained in the study. He spent the rest of the evening there, listening to the conversation of the other occupants who were discussing their holidays. Every few minutes the door burst open with a rattle, and a boy came in to pay a short and informal visit. No one took the least notice of Michael, and he was thankful to be left in peace. He had been visioning dire tortures inflicted on a white but unwaver-

ing Michael, but there appeared to be no inclination on the part of any one to indulge in amusements of that sort.

The boy at the next desk, whose name was Firth, had only been there one term, and Michael was handed over to him to be initiated into the mysteries of his new life. Firth, who was a foolish-looking boy with a freckled face, was good-natured but vague in his explanations. He was pleased at having some one junior to him in the study, but he disliked having to lead his satellite about with him.

When Michael lay that night in his extremely narrow iron bed he felt as if he was in a haven, where for a short time he was secure from the trials of the world. There were about a dozen other boys of various ages in the same room, and he had been astonished to see that before getting into bed each knelt to say prayers; and, that while he was doing so, the others spoke in subdued voices. Once again he discovered that the reality was not so bad as his anticipation of it. While he lay in the dark, he thought of Isobel for the first time for many days.

#### (II)

After the first few days, Michael began to find his level in the school. At first every one had appeared equally unapproachable, but he soon discovered those boys who had been there only a short time. These were quite prepared to be friendly, so that, in addition to his fellow "new scum," as the new boys were politely termed, he was at the end of his first week on speaking terms with a dozen or more boys who were his seniors only by one term. With one or other of these he walked to morning and afternoon school; or loafed about, hands in pockets, at odd times. He quickly found that most of these boys were younger than himself, and that it was more politic to allow it to be understood that he had been to a preparatory school. They were tolerant of most things, but there was a traditional prejudice against

those who had been privately brought up; for they felt with a good deal of reason that such boys had less stamina.

One of the new boys in Lakin's came nearer to being bullied than any one whom Michael saw while he was at school. He was a small and God-fearing young person named Bainbrigg. Unfortunately for him, it was discovered that his modest heart was shocked by the Rabelaisian language that prevailed, not only in Lakin's but throughout the school. It began by a group of inquiring minds assembling in the evenings in the study that he occupied. Sitting on the tables and desks, they would rack their brains for suitable expressions, so successfully that they were able to keep up a flow of unusual language for half an hour on end. Bainbrigg, the youngest member of the party, would not dare to protest, but sitting at his desk grew pink in his agony. He became known as "Ernest," because he was such an earnest Christian. After a time, one or two boys, who were not content with the original program, resorted to other methods. There were tales of unpleasant happenings in the changing-rooms, and one day a house-monitor surprised a flushed and embarrassed party in Bainbrigg's study. Soon after that it was stopped, and in future the earnest Christian had little more to bear than his name, and an occasional satirical remark. The monitors, who were inclined to turn a blind eye upon vice in which the participants were free agents, stepped in when, as in the present case, they felt that it was "a bit too thick."

Michael, who was not easily shocked, escaped any such difficulties as these, but for some time he did not understand much of the conversation of those about him, because he had never read of such depths, and through reading he had gained his only knowledge of life.

He was placed in the fourth form, and found the work well within his grasp, but to his dismay he discovered that he had no idea how to play games. He dreaded the days

upon which his name appeared on the football list, and when he was on the field, was in agony lest the ball should come in his direction, for when it did he always bungled. One day Harbottle, a round, happy-looking boy, made him play fives, and he spent two miserable hours hitting the air. Already, he began to be recognized as a Rotter, and as such belonged to the most despised class in the school. A boy might be stupid or vicious, and yet be universally popular, but a Rotter, one who was no good at games, had to fight a losing game all along the line.

On the whole, however, Michael enjoyed his first term at Harbridge. When first he arrived, he looked out for the boy with whom he had lunch on the day of the examination, but he could not see him; nor did he recognize any of the others whom he had seen that day. Soon after the beginning of the term he got permission from home to learn music, and from that day he spent more time at the piano than was good for him. But the pleasure he got from it helped him to forget the snubs he received whenever he appeared on the football field.

There was no time Michael enjoyed so much as the hour of his music lesson each week. Mr. Hall, the school organist, who taught him, was a good-natured man; who, had he not been by nature incurably lazy, might have made a fine musician. His organ-playing had rather spoiled his performance on the piano, but Michael, who was not very critical, considered him a genius. Mr. Hall, for his part, was delighted to get a pupil who really seemed to take some interest in his work, and in consequence took more trouble than usual with him. Now and then he added a red-letter day to Michael's calendar by asking him into his room in the afternoon for an informal lesson. At these times he treated Michael very much as an equal, and they discussed music together. Although Michael was a devoted admirer of Mr. Hall, he had enough character to have opinions of

his own upon many matters connected with music, notably as to the possibilities of what was known then as the "New Movement." In a rash moment Mr. Hall had once played a few pieces by Debussy and Scriabine, of whom he was inclined to be contemptuous, and from that day he had no peace; Michael clamored constantly for more. The glimpse he had then was a revelation to him; he felt that some undefined feeling had at last found expression in the music he had heard, and he wasted his practice hours in trying to reproduce the various pieces which Mr. Hall played to him from time to time.

One day towards the middle of the term, Michael went to his music lesson with a Chopin nocturne, at which he was supposed to have been working, entirely untouched. He hoped, however, to escape censure by bluff. When the time came for him to play it, he said with black hypocrisy:

"Somehow I don't seem quite to have the hang of it, sir. I wish you would play it to me again, so that I can see how it should be done."

Mr. Hall had his suspicions, but went to the piano and did so. When he finished, Michael, who had been listening intently, played it without a fault.

"That's not bad at all," said Mr. Hall smiling, "but I played it in the wrong key, and I should like you to explain why you did so too."

He had been a good deal struck by Michael's mature playing, however, and he said:

"If you don't mind my asking, Lawson, are you going in for a profession when you are older? I mean, will you have to depend upon your work for a living?"

"I think so."

"Oh, well, it's out of the question; but I was wondering how you would have liked to take up music professionally. Of course, as you know, it's no use thinking about it unless you are independent—it's too risky."

Michael agreed, but his imagination was inflamed, and he did not dismiss the idea so easily as he pretended. In idle moments, when he should have been working, he toyed with the possibility of making money as a pianist, and reflected that there was no reason why he should not be able to do what others had done. At present it was only a fancy with which to dally, for he considered himself still destined to be a doctor.

## (III)

The days at Harbridge were so full that Michael would have had little time to mope had he felt inclined to do so, but on the whole he was contented. When his face became familiar, the senior boys ceased to regard him. During school hours he passed unnoticed, and in Lakin's it was only when he transgressed one of the innumerable unwritten laws of the school that he was made to suffer. One day, when it was raining, he walked across to work with an umbrella, a thing no one except the prefects might do with impunity. He realized his mistake too late to remedy it; and, for the rest of a miserable morning, he heard on all sides groans and strange sounds expressive of the utmost contempt. For the most part, he seldom came into conflict with any one. His chief feeling was one of inferiority. He hurried past masters and boys alike with downcast eyes, and once when the Captain of Football, who had known Roger, spoke to him he was almost breathless with humility.

Michael had two letters during the first part of the term to remind him that he had interests of his own apart from the school. The first was from Joan Somerton; who, unable to banish him from her thoughts, succeeded in overcoming her shyness sufficiently to write. For the moment he was pleased, and carried her letter about in his pocket (the knowledge never reached her to make her heart flutter) but a week later it was forgotten when, day of days, he re-

ceived a letter in Isobel's resolute handwriting. She wrote from school.

"DEAR BONY,

"Aren't you astonished to see my bad writing after all this time? I really did mean to write before, so please don't look so miserable, poor thing. How are you getting on? I don't want to know in the least, really; and, what is more, you positively must not write here, or there will be a fearful rumpus, as we are only allowed letters from aunts and people; not from fancy-boys. Does my vulgarity make you blush for me? Sometimes I think I should like to see your scrubby face coming along the road when we are out in Ark-formation, but don't get too excited as I don't miss you much.

"You shall come to stay with us sometime, if you are good and behave prettily. I have got a heap of letters to write and this must be smuggled out, so I must stop. Cheer up. I have not quite forgotten you yet.—ISOBEL."

Michael sucked the honey from this, and avoided the gall; at times he almost wished it had never come, so vividly did it conjure up Isobel in all her maddening sweetness. For a few days he felt again that he was destined to be the life-long victim of a tragic but splendid passion, but his melancholy soon passed away, and he began once more to take a healthy interest in the every-day incidents of his life.

Busy receiving new impressions, Michael scarcely noticed the flight of time, and before he realized that half-term was past, the examinations were upon him. Then once more, but this time with very different feelings, he heard the clatter of cabs and the bumping of boxes in the yard of Lakin's. On the last day of the term he got up early and walked to the station with another boy, feeling that he was quite an old hand. If only he was not so bad at games!

## CHAPTER VIII

### TEA FOR THREE

(I)

THE public-school system has a large number of critics, many of whom are able to speak from personal experience, and whose antagonism is based upon something more substantial than the dislike of a theory. A man may blindfold himself as he will, but he cannot hide the fact that those who pass through a public school without losing their self-respect are few in number. It is as easy to be too meticulous about such a question as to view it too freely, and the undoubted advantages of the system make it impossible to condemn it off-hand. Those who regard the matter with liberal eyes point to the boys who have emerged unscathed, and affirm, with some show of reason, that they compare but ill with the reprobates. They may be right; but, as Michael would have phrased it at this time, there is a limit. Unfortunately it is too often passed at almost every public school, not only in England but throughout the world. Nevertheless, faulty and culpable as the system may be in that respect, it seldom fails to bring out any good qualities that might otherwise have remained latent in those who undergo it, or to teach them how to acquire the courage necessary to "say Yea to Life."

After being three years at Harbridge, Michael was at heart very much the same, but outwardly he had not only changed but improved. That he had more moral stamina was shown by his altered bearing. Almost imperceptibly his eyes, which on the day when he was spoken to by the

Captain of Football were on the ground, had raised the limit of their vision until he was able to look about him, if not so freely as some, at any rate sufficiently to prove that he was not destined to be a craven. Some qualification is necessary, because he had never mastered his ineptitude for games, and although he had won some small standing for himself among the junior section of the school, he was still forced to yield precedence to those who had gained their house or school colors. He was a free but an humble agent; although, had he considered the matter, he would have probably come to the conclusion that in reality he was as good as any one at the school. But he never troubled himself with such speculations, and was satisfied with his lower rank. At times, it is true, he rebelled silently against the unspoken but hardly veiled contempt with which the athletic section of the school regarded him and his companions, but he never allowed his feelings to master him; so that, on the whole, he got on very well with his contemporaries.

During the summer term, Maud was married to her soldier, and Michael spent an excited week at home. With Roger he acted as steward at the church, and, from a detached standpoint, observed with glimmerings of amusement the perturbation of his parents, and the scarcely concealed tedium of the guests. Shortly after their wedding the newly-married couple sailed for India, where the bridegroom had to rejoin his regiment, and they passed out of Michael's life. While he was in town, Michael went to one or two concerts, rather to the indignation of Maud, who seemed to consider that all her family ought to sit about her in wrapt joy. Having heard scarcely any good music before this, Michael's experiences at the concerts served further to strengthen his determination to devote his life to music.

During the succeeding holidays he spent every penny he could scrape together in haunting concert-halls, and at last

divulged his intention. It was received with unqualified scorn by his family; even Rosie trying to persuade him that he was foolhardy.

Shaken by their ridicule, he allowed the victory to rest with his parents for the time, but in his heart his resolve was unshaken.

(II)

Michael's official career at Harbridge was not marked by any great brilliance. In three years he rose from the lower-fourth to the upper-fifth form, without obtaining a prize. He always felt that the subject upon which he was for the moment engaged was the one in which he was weakest, and he shone only on those occasions when, as in English Composition, his natural wit was as useful as work he was supposed to have learned. His serious and reserved bearing made the masters inclined to look upon him with favorable eyes, until they found that, behind his discreet attitude, there lurked a spirit as restless and as idle as that of the wildest members of the form. With the rest of the school, he regarded work as a thing to be done just sufficiently to evade punishment; as a task for the moment, that would have no bearing upon his future life. He was not idle by nature; but no one ever took the trouble to point out the use of his work, or to make it interesting to him.

At the beginning of his third year, Michael's principal companions were two boys named Bristow and Standforth; the latter being more usually known as "Possum," a name the origin of which was lost in obscurity. The three were known ironically as "the World, the Flesh, and the Devil." Michael, on account of his secretive nature, representing the last of the trio, and the cheery Possum the first. Bristow was the least individual of the three, and it was he who yearned to imitate the gods of the school by patronizing doubtful public houses, and indulging in similar silly ex-

ploys. Possum occasionally followed his lead; but Michael, who did not consider it worth the risk, resolutely refused to do so.

They had, however, one passion in common; that of spending Sunday afternoons at a cottage a few miles from the school, where they had tea and smoked. But they came very near to losing this enjoyment, for several boys having been detected smoking by the vigilant prefects, the lockers of the whole school were searched one day, without any previous warning. This act, which was universally condemned as rotten, brought to light a large stock of smoking materials, which were confiscated with a warning. Michael & Co., who concealed their hoard inside a box-camera belonging to Possum, escaped detection. They realized, however, that additional caution would be required if their outings were to be continued; the more so since they had an unconfirmed suspicion that their Sabbath-day movements had been recently engaging the attention of Dickinson and Perriman, two of the prefects. The following Sunday, therefore, they laid plans with ingenuity worthy of a better cause.

Nominally, there was no work on Sundays; but in the afternoon the whole school assembled reluctantly in the class-rooms, where they were entertained by a lecture on Divinity. On the day in question, when four o'clock struck and the boys began to pour from the entrance to the school buildings, the World, the Flesh and the Devil might have been seen to emerge from the crowd and set off in opposite directions at a leisurely pace. Directly they were out of sight, however, a change came over the sauntering figures. Each removed from his head the battered silk hat he was wearing; and, folding it Gibus-wise beneath his arm, regardless of consequences, set off as fast as his legs could carry him.

A mile away at a rendezvous, they met, breathless.

Michael and Bristow were the first to arrive, Possum appearing shortly afterwards.

"Have you seen any one?" asked that redoubtable strategist. "No? well, it isn't safe all the same. I think we had better double, don't you?" and, when they had recovered their breath, they tore off for half a mile in the wrong direction, until they reached the entrance to a railway cutting through which they retraced their steps.

At five o'clock they reached their destination, a small and disreputable cottage, and effected a discreet entrance through a hen-run. In the sitting-room where a meal was waiting, they fortified their overstrung nerves with a draught of tea, and then yielded to their mirth.

"What's the betting we've rotted them?" asked Possum.

"Can't you imagine them capering off to Woodford? Oh! Lord, it's too damned funny, really!"

Tea over, the windows were carefully closed, notwithstanding the heat of the day, to preclude the possibility of any smoke escaping; and soon the room was veiled in the fumes of the expensive tobacco that only schoolboys can afford to smoke. The soothing influence of the weed made itself felt, and the gaunt spectre of a wild philosophy stalked the room.

"What I want to know is, why should the poor devils who run this show grind their guts out all their lives, whilst hundreds of people hog it in motors, and so on?" asked Bristow, who felt vague Socialistic impulses stirring in his young soul.

"Shy over the tea-jerry, you old owl," murmured Possum who was thirsty.

Michael took up the cudgels, but the brisk discussion that followed soon degenerated into personalities.

"Of course every one knows that you want aristocrats, so that they can go to your beastly concerts," said Bristow, appealing to invisible multitudes.

"I should like to see you in a hole like this with Mrs. Jarvis—they have probably got about forty kids."

"Well, I would rather have them than a face like yours. Why, if you asked a girl to marry you, she would burst out into spots and die."

"Keep quiet, you blithering fools," hissed Possum at this point, "can't you see that there is some one outside?"

Fear gripped their hearts, and they crouched on the floor while Possum reported the movements of the unseen.

"There are two of 'em, crawling about in the road. I can't see who they are because of the hedge. What the hell are they doing? Oh, Lord! it is Perriman *and* Dickinson," he groaned, as the two prefects appeared at the gate and approached the house. Prostrate the trio hatched plans.

"Can't we shin up the chimney to the roof?"

"Why not bolt through the window with the table-cloth over our heads as they come in?"

"It's too small."

Voices were heard at the door where Mrs. Jarvis was surmised to be repelling the assault. Presently the voice of Perriman was heard.

"Are you sure there is no one here?"

"No, sir." Mrs. Jarvis was apologetic.

"Well—what is in that room?"

"My daughter Alice, sir. She is asleep I hope, poor dear; in fact when I heard you knock I says to Mr. Jarvis, 'There is Dr. Brown, and long enough he has been.'"

The voices became indistinct, a door shut and silence succeeded.

"What the devil is the old cat doing?" groaned Bristow huskily.

"My Lord, we are done for. It's a swiping for a cert."

"There's not much comfort in that—let's clear out."

"Shut your row; there's some one coming."

Mrs. Jarvis knocked and, entering, paused to survey the

apparently empty room. After a moment Possum's tangled head rose above the far side of the table. She jumped.

“Lord, sir, what a turn you give me!”

“Where have they gone?” chorused the re-arisen three.

“‘Tis only two gentlemen what have come to tea. I put them in the kitchen, thinking as you wouldn’t mind, sir. I told them my girl was in here, as I thought you would not want to be disturbed, sir.”

Safely free of the torture-chamber, the gallant trio sniggered.

“How we did them!”

“It was a damned near thing!”

“I knew they went somewhere for tea; the swobs!”

### (III)

It was the custom in Lakin’s for those boys who were in the same form to enter to a certain degree into partnership where work was concerned. Two or three would club together to buy “Cabs,” or translations of the Latin or Greek authors who were being read that term. Where there was a promising new-boy it was gently, but firmly, explained to him that it would tend to the greatest good of the greatest number, if he handed his exercises to less fortunate members of his form, for them to peruse. In this way a spirit of mutual reliance was fostered. Such practices were carried on more or less openly, and were so inherent that house-masters usually kept away from the studies before morning school.

One morning, towards the end of the term, while Michael was sitting nursing his Virgil among a little group of boys in a corner of the changing-room, the House-John came in and told him that Mr. Lakin wished to see him. With youthful optimism his companions painted the object of this call.

“Now you are in for it, my lad.”

"Some one has spotted you smoking."

"Hell awaits you, my son."

"Shut up, you fools!" retorted Michael. "I wonder what on earth the Old Man wants."

As he hurried up the stairs, he reviewed any recent peccadilloes that might have come to light, and turned into his study to make sure that the treasured camera still held its hoard. There was nothing suspicious there; but, as he approached the green baize door that shut off the private portion of the house, he experienced a sensation of unreality, like that which he had felt when, four years previously, he entered his father's study to be told that he was to go to Sempervale. A moment later he found himself sitting in the easy-chair in Mr. Lakin's study, while his house-master spoke to him in an unusually kind voice.

"I don't think it does any good to beat about the bush, Lawson, so I will tell you at once that I have some bad news—it concerns your father."

Michael knew instinctively what was coming. "Is he dead?" he asked.

"Yes; you were not expecting it?"

"Oh, no; when I last heard he was quite well."

"Yes, it was very sudden—his heart."

Mr. Lakin, who had been looking out of the window, turned as he said these words; and, walking across to touch Michael with a sympathetic hand, he added, "You need not mind me, my dear fellow, don't be afraid to cry. I know how it must upset you, and there is nothing to be ashamed of in sorrow."

Sitting in the comfortable chair, Michael felt quite calm. He seemed merely to be the spectator of an interview between two persons in whom he had no personal interest. But, when Mr. Lakin finished speaking, he realized that he was expected to show the emotion he did not feel. He guessed that other scenes of the same sort had been wit-

nessed in the room, and that they had ended in tears. He drew out his handkerchief; and, rather to his astonishment, found that there were tears upon his face. As soon as he decently could do so, he wanted to get away from the room, and go into school as usual; but Mr. Lakin insisted upon his exemption from work during the morning.

"Perhaps if you feel up to it, you might go in this afternoon," he said, "but now I dare say you would like to be alone for a time, and you will find it quiet in my dining-room."

Michael felt relieved when the door closed and he was left alone in the room where, a few weeks previously, he had sat as guest at one of the dinners to which Mr. Lakin from time to time invited a few of the boys in his house. He felt, however, that he was hard-hearted and callous to take the news so lightly. Sitting near the window he tried to summon the grief that was lacking, but his thoughts kept wandering from the memories he conjured up from the past. There was a pile of music on one of the chairs; and, pausing to make sure that no one was approaching the room, he slipped across to see what it was.

When Mrs. Lakin came in to console him, Michael was back in the chair by the window with a dusky handkerchief crushed to his nose.

To his secret but profound relief, Michael did not go home to the funeral; every one thinking it better that he should be spared the ordeal. For a few days he kept a check upon his laughter, and proceeded soberly about the school in a new black suit. A grief-stricken letter from Rosie upset him for the moment, but the majority of the letters he received from his relatives only irritated him by their clumsy references to his father, and he soon slipped back into his old habits. Death seemed less real to him than Life.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE SOCK-CRUSADE

(I)

THERE was at Harbridge a school paper in which the events of the term were chronicled. It appeared six times a year, and a copy was presented to every boy in the school; the price being added to the bill forwarded to his parents each term. The pages of this paper were occupied chiefly by accounts of house-matches, and by various official notices; but there were usually a few columns of prose, or verse in a light vein, for which the boys themselves were responsible. The authors of such articles naturally received no payment, but it was by no means easy to get a contribution accepted by the editors, who were the two prefects senior for the time being. Rather than print anything that was considered inferior, they were quite prepared to forego such contributions altogether.

For some time Michael had been casting a speculative eye upon *The Harbridgian*, as the paper was called. He did not suppose for a moment that he had a gift for writing, but he thought that by appearing as a contributor to its pages he might add to his too slight reputation. For a long time these musings bore no fruit, because he could not decide upon a suitable subject for his article. He made up his mind that, if he wrote at all, it should be about something better than the subjects that appeared in one form or another in almost every number. It was not until towards the end of the term during which his father died that he at length lighted upon what he believed to be exactly the thing.

One of the rules at Harbridge was that only clothes of a black, or dark-blue color might be worn by the boys during

the term. Youth, with its love of adornment and of circumventing the law, constantly hankered after an outlet for its pent-up passion for color. Occasionally, some spirit bolder than the rest appeared at the beginning of a term in a light suit or a colored overcoat, but invariably these disappeared after one appearance in public, and their owners were forced to resume the sober hues of scholarship. While Michael was at school, however, a nameless genius discovered that, for some reason or other, the regulation omitted to forbid the wearing of colored socks. The consequence was that the local shops were ransacked, and all those boys whose position in the school warranted it appeared with their trousers braced and turned up to disclose several inches of vividly-clad ankle. As time passed, a spirit of emulation set in, with the result that new and more startling combinations of colors appeared as the shops of towns further afield yielded up their stores. Michael himself never attempted to appear in anything but the regulation colors; he knew that if he departed from them it would be considered "side," but he never really desired to do so, for he did not belong to the set to which such things appealed.

In this mania, for it was no less, Michael saw the subject for his article. Without pausing to mature his ideas, he acted upon the inspiration; and one evening when his form-master had relaxed his vigilance, it was written. It was highly satirical, and his efforts to make it amusing caused it to be crude and forced in expression, but he was pleased with it, and considered that it would accomplish the purpose for which it was written. He pictured its effect, and imagined the whole school rocking with laughter, and praising "good old Lawson;" he fancied also that the satire would tickle the masters. On his way out, he dropped it into the box in which such articles had to be placed, and dismissed it from his mind; knowing that a month must elapse before it

could appear in print. He decided not to mention what he had done even to Possum or Bristow, in order that the effect of it might not in any way be spoilt by anticipation.

A few days later, while he was wandering aimlessly about the school grounds, wondering what to do until it was time to return to the house for tea, he met Possum, who had just completed an hour of extra work, the result of unseemly behavior.

"Hullo! Possum," he said, glad at the prospect of a companion, "what do you propose to do?"

"Oh! let's go to the shop for a drink; it's viley hot, and I'm as dry as the dickens."

While they sipped lemon-squash in the Tuck-shop, they revolved the day's happenings.

"What's all this row about 'the Harbun'?" asked Possum.

"What row?" asked Michael, pricking up his ears at the mention of the paper.

"Some ass has written some fooling rot about colored socks or something; there's going to be the hell of a row."

Michael turned cold, and then colored furiously, but Possum was not looking at him, and did not notice his embarrassment. He wondered if he should tell him who was the author; but, after hearing his creation described so slightly, he felt he could not. In a moment it was too late, and he was committed to silence.

"Did you hear who wrote it?" he asked.

"No. I don't think they know, but Perriman says he will find out, even if he has to compare it with the writing of every one in the school."

"But why are they so savage?"

"Well, it is rather low, don't you think so? It would have been put in for a dead cert; you know how sick Lowe is about the socks. It's probably some young swine who thinks that he can get on his soft side by writing it."

The possibility of it being considered in that light was a new idea, and it had never occurred to Michael that the worst possible construction would be put upon his efforts. He felt desperate; if once he was detected he would be done for. He dreaded the suspense and the chatter that would be sure to go on while Perriman was slowly dogging his prey.

When he reached Lakin's, Michael went straight to his study, in order that he might consider what he should do. As he opened the door, he knew that he was too late to save himself. The room was occupied by half a dozen of the gods, among whom he saw Perriman and Dickinson. They were sitting waiting for him. He paused on the threshold and turned to go, but Perriman called him back.

"Here, Lawson, we want to speak to you; is this your writing?" he asked, holding out the ill-fated work.

"Yes," answered Michael, feeling as if his voice had answered from a great distance; the blood sang in his ears.

"Well, what is it?"

"Why, it's a thing I wrote for 'the Harbun'—about colored socks, you know."

"What the devil do you mean by it, you lifty young cub?"

"It was meant to be funny," answered Michael, perceiving wanly the humor of the situation.

"If you were in my study, I would give you a swiping you wouldn't soon forget. I've never heard such lip in all my life!"

"Surely you don't think it was meant seriously?" With his back to the wall, Michael had a faint hope that he might convince them.

"Do you think we are going to be dictated to by scum like you?" broke in some one, who until then had remained silent.

Michael was amazed; he was scarcely able to believe that they could be so childish as to regard the matter seriously.

With white lips he tried falteringly to explain, but they would not listen to him. He felt ill and disheartened. At length they left. At the door Perriman turned; and, with a sudden sweep of his elbow, dashed Michael's head against the wall.

"Perhaps that will help to remind you who you are!" he said, and then followed the rest.

His head ringing, and his heart full of despair, Michael stumbled to his desk and burst into tears of grief and shame.

#### (II)

From that day Michael was an outcast. The word passed round the school that "Lawson must be cut." When he left Lakin's for evening school, there was a knot of boys waiting for him at the gate; and, as he walked hurriedly towards the haven that awaited him when work began, his attempted dignity was jolted out of him. He was surrounded by three or four boys who continually elbowed him; his cap was trampled underfoot, and his boots were jerked from under his arm; when he tried to collect them he was knocked onto his knees. All the time, a chorus of execration rose and fell.

In Lakin's the hostility was less marked. Michael was untouched and every one was civil, but no more. If he addressed any one he was answered; but he was not spoken to, except when necessary. As he went about the house, he heard himself discussed with contempt in the studies, the open doors of which he passed. He was not quite alone, however, for Bristow and Possum with unexpected courage stood by him; and, after the first evening, accompanied him everywhere; with the result that they received a share of the general indignation. Except in the house, or when he was working, he had no moment of peace. His form, which contained boys from every house in the school, led him a life to which they would have subjected no dog. He

tried to evade their fury by arriving late, and welcomed the hours of extra work that he received in consequence; for, under the eye of a master the persecution relaxed.

At first, Michael tried to console himself by the reflection that the outburst would soon pass off. He had noticed how short was the memory of the school, and he calculated that in ten days at the outside his offense would be forgotten. The time passed, however, without any appreciable change appearing in the attitude of the school; the kicks and blows ceased, it was true, but everywhere he was greeted by the strange sounds with which boys are so well able to express their scorn. Even the new boys joined in the general outburst of execration, and were commended when they shouted insults in their childish voices. His courage ebbed, and he wondered how long he would be able to bear the life he was being led. He had coveted popularity more than he quite knew, and the disastrous result of his efforts to gain it broke his spirit.

The matter did not exist for long unnoticed by the authorities, who were astonished at the thoroughness with which the boycott of Michael was conducted. There was an informal meeting in the head-master's study to discuss what should be done. The fact that hostilities were suspended in the presence of the masters made it difficult for them to cope with the affair. It was suggested that some pretext should be invented for calling Michael home; but Dr. Lowe, who realized that such a line of action would do more to damage the victim than anything else, opposed the idea, and it was dropped. It was decided at length that the frenzy should be allowed to run its course, but that it should be watched and not allowed to go too far. After the meeting was over, Dr. Lowe, who had heard that Michael was devoted to music, sent for Mr. Hall and suggested that the latter might be able to do something in an unofficial capacity to lighten Michael's burden. Mr. Hall, who liked Michael,

was quite willing to exert himself on his behalf, but was faced by the same difficulties in choosing a method of procedure. He consulted Mr. Mellor, the master of Michael's form, and they decided that, as it was useless to try and cure the evil, the best thing they could do would be to alleviate it. The result was that one evening Michael found a note upon his desk asking him to tea in Mr. Hall's rooms the following day. Seldom had anything been so welcome; he knew that there, at any rate, he would be free of his incubus for a few hours, and he waited with impatience for the time to come.

Michael found Mr. Hall in a very amusing mood; and, while they were waiting for tea to be brought in, he was kept in fits of laughter. After their long depression, his spirits rose in bounds, and he was well able to respond to his host's sallies. During tea Mr. Mellor dropped in; and, although for the moment he seemed an intrusion, he quickly adapted himself to the spirit of his companions, and proved a great asset to the party.

Pipe in mouth, Mr. Mellor turned to Michael. "Well, Lawson," he said, "I hear you have been covering yourself with glory over an article in 'The Harbun.' "

"Hardly glory," answered Michael; who in such pleasant company felt inclined to treat the matter lightly.

"Well, a prophet and his honor, you know—and at any rate you have taken it fairly well, by all accounts."

Michael glowed, but tried to look dubious.

"I wish I knew what to do," he said; "I am getting pretty well fed up with it."

"Just keep your end up; it will have blown over by next term, and this one is nearly over."

"But it doesn't seem to blow over so easily."

"To be candid, I don't think you were wise to write it, but it is no use regretting it now," said Mr. Hall, interposing. "You keep your end up, as Mr. Mellor suggests;

it is the best thing you can do. Better men than you have had a bad time of it before now."

After Mr. Mellor left, the concert was discussed. It had been arranged that Michael should play a piano solo; but, now that the school was up in arms against him, he wanted to give up the idea. Mr. Hall would not hear of it.

"You surely don't want to show that you are beaten; of course you must play," he said.

"All right," agreed Michael, but he did not at all like the idea.

When Michael met his form-master in school next day there was no trace of the intimacy of the previous afternoon, and he was given a punishment for inattention. He had, however, taken fresh heart; and, during the time he had spent in Mr. Hall's rooms, he gathered a new store of courage with which to face his fortune.

Michael now began to work very hard in his spare time, practising for the concert. He determined that there should be no reason for complaint on the score of his performance, and spent more time than was really necessary perfecting himself. But he had another reason for practising diligently: when he was at the piano he was left in peace. Only once had he been tormented during his practise hour, when a handful of boys came and sat on the piano. Even then they did not stay long, as it was against the rules for any one out of school hours to enter the class-rooms, in which the pianos were kept, unless they had come to practise. He was quite safe now, as Mr. Hall gave him permission to practise in his room, in order that he might accustom himself to a grand-piano.

There Michael went every day as the concert drew near, and the feeling of security made the privilege doubly valuable, so that it seemed to him that he had never enjoyed any hours at Harbridge so much as those which he spent in that room. Having pledged himself to play, he had no intention

of trying to back out at the last minute, but he dreaded having to face the whole school in a place so public as the concert-hall.

Possum was greatly taken with his friend's temerity. It was probably the first time in his life that he had been in any way interested in a concert. He had no pretensions to a musical temperament, and could perceive nothing more in Michael's playing than a monotonous and wearying din; but the idea of flinging a challenge in the teeth of the enemy intrigued him. As a rule, the subject of music was carefully avoided, but now Possum began to get wildly excited about the whole affair, although he had no hesitation in emphasizing his own opinion.

"You're entirely barmy, my son," he said, one day as they sprawled in the study.

"I couldn't very well back out," answered Michael.

"That's all very fine, but Hall hasn't the ghost of a notion what he's talking about."

"Even if they don't like it, they can't very well do anything."

"They will think it sheer side on your part; and, if they can't do anything at the time, they will be all the more savage afterwards."

"Damn the brutes! I shall be going home two days afterwards, so they won't have much time."

"It *will* be a gag!" exulted Possum.

When the program was posted on the notice-board two days later, Possum joined the surging crowd that surrounded it, and listened eagerly to hear what the effect was when they saw Michael's name. There was very little comment, however; he heard some one who read it say, "Lawson! Good Lord!" and a few facetious remarks followed; but that was all, and he hoped that after all he might have been exaggerating the danger.

## CHAPTER X

### THE CONCERT AND AFTER

(I)

THE School Concert was, from the boys' point of view, the most important ceremony in the year; to the masters, Speech-Day probably appeared more distinguished. But if a visitor wished to get an idea of the happiness that is supposed to reign at a public school, he would be directed to the concert-hall rather than to the speech-tent; for the latter, notwithstanding its pomp, was a sober affair, a canonized apotheosis of the class-room. At the concert, restraint was removed for a few blissful moments while the school song was sung by an old boy; a song that, changing in detail year by year, remained as firmly rooted so far as idea and melody were concerned in the memory of the school as the National Anthem. The audience, at least those who occupied the back benches to which parents and visitors were not admitted, literally rocked with laughter at its topical references; and, after every few words, the applause was so prolonged that both singer and accompanist not infrequently lost their places. While the chorus was sung, the noise was so terrific that the most pessimistic auditor could hardly remain of opinion that the nation was degenerating, the lung-power itself testifying to physical vigor.

In order that the visitors might be disturbed as little as possible, it was decided that performers and those boys who were not going to sit with relations should be washed, combed and in their places by seven o'clock, half an hour before the concert was due to begin. This was unfor-

tunate for Michael, who had hoped that he would be able to remain with Possum until the last moment, in order to keep his spirits up. When he entered the room in which the choir and those who were taking part in the performance were collected, there was a hum of excited talk. But he was in no mood to take an interest in school gossip, even if he had the opportunity, and he soon slipped out again into the passage. Before long, he found an empty room where he could remain unmolested until it was time for him to appear on the platform. There was a large packing-case standing against the wall, and he seated himself upon it with his feet dangling some inches above the floor.

Until then Michael had been too anxious to evade his enemies to feel nervous, but now in the silent room he realized that his nerves were in a chaotic state. He trembled and shivered so much that his feet at times drummed against the box with a hollow sound. Curiously enough, it was the strangers rather than the boys whom he now dreaded. He had never played before any sort of public, and he realized that for the first time he would get a taste of the experiences of a musical career. Intent upon his thoughts, it was not until they were quite close that he heard voices in the passage approaching the door. He prayed that no one would enter to find him sitting alone in an empty room. The speakers passed, and realizing the absurdity of his position he decided to leave his haven.

After a while, he cautiously opened the door and looked out; no one was in sight; but, instead of returning to the artists' room, he followed the passage in the opposite direction. He had been to the hall several times for rehearsals during the last few days, and he knew of a staircase that would lead him to the organ-loft, whence he could watch the audience without being seen.

As Michael opened the small panel that gave admittance to the loft, the first notes of the Fantasia on Gounod's *Faust*

that opened the concert sounded. He was astonished at the number of people. All the principal seats were occupied by the relatives of boys. There seemed to be innumerable men with shining white shirt-fronts, and women upon whose bare shoulders gems flashed as they breathed. The front row was occupied by the masters, a few of whom, rosettes of the school colors in their buttonholes, were standing about and acting as stewards. Directly beneath him he could see Mr. Hall conducting the orchestra, and the bald patch on the crown of his head glistened in the strong light. The choir were singing huskily, and the orchestra, who had not yet gained self-possession, were in difficulties. He heard Mr. Hall encouraging them, and trying to straighten the tangles in their playing. To his unseen critic he appeared deeply to be pitied, and Michael, who a moment before hated every member of the orchestra, was in agonies lest they should break down.

The concert dragged on. A throaty tenor sang *Onaway* as if he was hawking fish in the streets, but his audience were not critical, and as he was a Blue he received an ovation. The choir appeared in quartets, trios, and every combination that they could assume. Two very small boys quavered through a duet; the music, which they held like a shield in front of their faces, quivering like an aspen. The air grew heavy; Dr. Lowe furtively mopped his forehead, and the expression on Mr. Hall's face grew tired and strained. The guests, for whom the novelty had worn off, stifled their yawns with difficulty, and at the back of the hall the massed boys were counting the items before the school song.

At the end of the chorus that preceded his appearance, Michael left the organ-loft and hurried round to the artists' room. The choir and orchestra were streaming in; and, above their excited voices, he heard Mr. Hall shouting, "Has any one seen Lawson? Where on earth has he got

to? Oh, there you are!" he added, as he caught sight of Michael forcing his way through the crowd. He took him to one side.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"All right."

"Good man, don't lose your head, for my sake—you must go on now."

As he climbed the steps to the platform, Michael was astonished to find how calm he felt. A ripple of applause from the front seats greeted him, and somewhere at the back of the hall there was a single hiss. He flushed crimson, but instead of discouraging him, it filled him with rage. As he took his seat at the piano, he swore that he would give them something to remember.

Discarding the *Rondo Capriccioso* that was usually played, Michael had chosen two pieces that he thought more likely to appeal to the audience; one was a *Humoresque* by Balfour Gardiner, and the other an arrangement of an Irish reel. His playing was very different from that usually heard at such concerts, and Mr. Hall in the wings smiled delightedly as he realized that his pupil was on his mettle.

There was a good deal of applause from the front rows when Michael ended the first piece; and the masters, who had anticipated a hostile demonstration, settled more comfortably in their seats, hoping that nothing more was to be feared. Before they had done so, Michael, who scarcely paused to bow his acknowledgments, was lost in the whirl of the reel, and Mr. Hall wondered if he would be able to keep up the pace which was terrific, but he did not dare to call out for fear of upsetting him. Alone in the middle of the stage, Michael was in a state of frenzied excitement. Already wrought to a high pitch by the events of the day, he entered into the spirit of the piece with reckless audacity. He felt that he was dancing towards a goal that awaited him at the last bar; and abandoning all thought of artistry,

he strained every nerve to reach it quickly. The end seemed to hit him in the face, and he rose dizzily from his seat and tried to collect his thoughts.

For a moment there was silence; then from all sides came deafening hisses. At the back of the hall the school had risen in a body. Several boys made trumpets of their programs through which they tried to hiss more loudly; rattles, whistles, and gongs joined in, and the noise was overwhelming. Dr. Lowe stood up and faced the boys, but his voice could not be heard, even by those near him. From the babel a chant emerged: a dozen of the seniors had collected and were shouting in slow unison, "YOU SIDEY CAD." The words seemed branded on the air.

For a time Michael stood unable to move; then he lost control of himself, and shrieked inaudible curses at his enemies. Mr. Mellor, who had been sitting in the front row, sprang up and clambered over the pots of flowers at the front of the platform. He took Michael by the arm.

"Come off," he shouted, "they won't stop while you are here."

The touch on his arm brought Michael to himself, and he realized where he was. But he was filled with blind rage; wrenching himself free, he stumbled across the stage, and, seizing his coat, ran down the passage into the street. Behind him he could hear the uproar still continuing.

He was almost mad with passion; the emotion that for weeks had been pent up had at last broken free. Had the opportunity presented itself, he would have committed murder with savage joy. But the cooler air outside revived him; and, before he had gone far, he began to recover his self-control. He considered what he should do; the idea of returning to the house, and of spending two more days at the school, now that not only the boys but every one connected with it knew of his disgrace, was more than he could bring himself to do. On the other hand, he was unwilling

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to run away; it was childish. Having too little money to pay his fare to London by railway, he knew he would soon be caught. He felt very thirsty, and thought that he would get something to drink at a public house; he had seldom been to one before, but now it was the only place open. There he could think.

He entered a private bar, not because the penalty of discovery would be heavy—he snapped his fingers at authority—but as a member of the school he knew that he would be eyed with suspicion. He ordered a glass of brandy, feeling that he needed a strong stimulant, and as he drank it, tried to decide upon the course he was to follow. But he could not concentrate his mind. As the spirit took effect, his thoughts returned again to the concert-hall, and his anger began to rise. He finished his glass, and called for another. He quickly finished that also, and the bar began to grow misty; but, although his excitement was increasing, he felt that his mind was perfectly under control. Automatically he called for a third glass, and then a fourth.

“Excuse me, sir,” said the barman as he handed it to him, “but do you come from the Schools?”

“What’s that to do with you?” retorted Michael, to whom every one appeared an enemy.

“No offense, I do assure you, sir, but knowing how strict the rules are, and noticing your cap I thought . . . I ‘ope you are not feeling ill, sir?”

“No, damn you!” snapped Michael, and he burst from the bar-room. Once in the street, he put his cap into his pocket in order that it might not again betray him, for he had no intention of returning to his house.

At first the coolness of the night air once more revived him, but as he strode through the town its effect wore off, and the spirit he had drunk began to affect him. He gave no thought to the time; in his ears he heard the roar of execration ringing still. Unconsciously he passed along the

streets through which he would have to go to reach the school. He could not see very distinctly, and there was a humming noise in his ears; at times the ground seemed to heave beneath his feet. As he turned sharply round a corner, he ran against two men who were standing there talking. He swore at them, and looking up saw a face that seemed familiar. Where had he seen it? It seemed to him evil, and he hit wildly at it with his clenched fist. There was a roar in his ears, and suddenly the ground fell away. . . .

## (II)

On the day following the concert, the school was in a turmoil of excitement; and, when the boys assembled for morning work, very little was done. Every one asked what had happened to Lawson. From the moment he left the platform no one appeared to have seen him, and his bed had been empty during the night. Some one had been told by somebody else that he was in the sick-room at Lakin's, and the wildest rumors circulated. It was said that he had attempted to commit suicide; that he had been detected in the act of setting fire to the concert-hall; and that he had run away. The masters were infected with the general unrest, and every now and then left their form-rooms to ask a neighbor if he had heard anything definite. There was a feeling that the spirit of retribution was hovering in the air.

When work was over, there was a general move to the notice-board. It was seen that those who arrived first evidently had found something startling, and a rush ensued. There was soon a crowd of several hundred boys struggling to see the two notices that were pinned upon it.

*"In view of the disgraceful disturbance that took place during the concert last night, the school holidays will be*

*shortened by two weeks, and will therefore terminate upon September 3rd instead of upon September 17th.*

“H. G. LOWE.”

*“There will be a meeting of the House-Masters in the Head-Master’s study at 12 o’clock to-day. It is desired that all should attend.*

“E. R. LAKIN.”

It was soon common knowledge that Michael was in the sick-room as rumor had surmised, but the reason for his isolation was not known. There was a general feeling that he had been placed there to protect him; and the attitude of the school, which after the concert had veered round slightly in his favor, again grew contemptuous.

When the house-masters met, Dr. Lowe recognized that he was face to face with one of the crises at which the opinion of the majority of his colleagues was at variance with his own. He was strong enough to make a stand for his own views, but he was still far from wielding the power of absolute veto, without which he knew that he was powerless. The meeting was stormy, and one or two of his subordinates showed that they had no intention of concurring with him. At length he had to yield, and the meeting was broken up after having lasted for nearly two hours.

After lunch, which he ate in the sparsely furnished room that acted as half-way house to the school sanatorium, Michael was told that he was to be taken to Dr. Lowe. A cab was waiting, and he was driven across in it to the head-master’s house, in order that he might have no opportunity of communicating with any of the boys. As he was driven round in the cab his heart sank. The sick-room, in addition to its functions as such, acted as a condemned cell for those boys who were to be expelled, and the fact of his confinement in it boded ill. When first he had awoken to find

himself there, his mind was blank, and he wondered what had happened, but after a while the events of the preceding night came back to him, and he knew that some one must have found and taken him back to the school.

When he entered the head-master's study, Michael found three people awaiting him: Dr. Lowe at his table, Mr. Lakin sitting near him, and Canon Fraser, a house-master, who was universally disliked because of his uncompromising rigor. Dr. Lowe turned in his revolving chair towards Michael.

"I am sorry to say, Lawson, that I have called you here upon a very serious matter," he said in a stern voice. "You were discovered late last night in a state of intoxication in the town. Have you any explanation to give?"

"I think, sir, that, while I can't deny what you say, you will admit that the excuse was obvious; you should have prevented what happened at the concert," replied Michael, his white face becoming colored with a flush upon the cheek-bones.

"You must not speak like that, Lawson; you forget yourself. I do recognize that the circumstances were exceptional, and for that reason I called a meeting of my colleagues this morning in order that I might take their aid in deciding how I should deal with you. I will tell you that, personally, I considered you would be punished sufficiently if I asked your mother to take you away from this school. You were no doubt in a state of excitement, and Mr. Lakin tells me that until now your conduct has been satisfactory; in fact, you have to thank him for intervening on your behalf."

"I do, sir," said Michael, turning to his house-master, and feeling a wave of emotion sweep through him.

"For these reasons," continued Dr. Lowe, "I was inclined to view your case leniently, but I am sorry to say that your offense was not limited to that; you violently as-

saulted Canon Fraser, and he assures me that you recognized him when you did so."

"He's a liar, then!" cried Michael, consumed with hatred for the tall man, who was sitting scrutinizing him through his eye-glasses.

"Be quiet, sir! Had I any intention of treating you better than your disgraceful conduct deserved, your present behavior would deter me—but I have decided that such an offense as yours cannot be overlooked. You are expelled from the school, and will leave by the four o'clock train this afternoon. Not only do you leave in the greatest disgrace that can befall a boy, but I forbid you to enter the grounds of the school for ten years from this time. I hope that by then you will have learned to live honestly and soberly."

Directly Dr. Lowe ceased to speak, Michael, who had been scowling at Canon Fraser, burst out, "You cad!—Oh! You beastly cad!"

"Hold your tongue, Lawson, you are beside yourself," said Mr. Lakin; and, taking Michael by the shoulder, he opened the door and led him from the room.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE COMPLETE COUNTRY GENTLEMAN

(I)

So long as the untoward does not occur, it is not difficult to live for a considerable time upon nothing more substantial than a reputation for financial soundness. It is astonishing how apt elderly people are to judge the character of their juniors by those of their parents, and how willing they are to believe that, because Mr. So-and-So always used to pay his bills punctually, he must still be able to do so even if he does not. In this material age, when the young are taught to trust no one, it is curious how much such trust is depended upon in all the affairs of life. It is not astonishing when a man finds for the first time the ease with which he can live upon credit, that he should be greatly tempted to continue to do so, even when he knows that by exerting himself he can free himself from his obligations. Yesterday saps the courage of to-morrow, and he who has once failed is unwilling to struggle again, lest his efforts should end in failure. It is so much easier for him to let things slide; to postpone facing the difficulty until he is feeling more up to the mark, or for any other excuse.

Although Mrs. Lawson had known for some time that her husband was not so prosperous as he had been a few years before, she was wholly unprepared for the state of his affairs when they were exposed by his death. Ignorant of the fate that awaited him, and no doubt feeling confident that his end was still far off, he had not endeavored to put

them in order. The reverses of late years had made a large hole in his capital, which had never been large, and what was left was soon still more diminished by paying the considerable debts that had slowly accumulated. His widow found herself faced with a problem that appalled her by its difficulty; her means were restricted to a small annuity which her husband had purchased, in a rare moment of foresight some years before, in order that she might not be totally unprovided for. Nothing else remained from the wreck of his fortune, with the exception of a sum of £300 that was to be devoted to finishing Michael's education. Fervently did Mrs. Lawson thank Heaven that the blow had not fallen until Maud and Roger were independent; as it was, she hardly knew how she was going to keep Rosie as well as herself on her small income.

There were a great many consultations between the mother and daughter, and Rosie was very anxious to try and obtain a situation as governess, but her mother would not hear of such a thing. She hoped that, long before she herself died, Rosie would marry, or that at any rate her two brothers would be in a position to help her. She was touched by the thoughtfulness of her children, but she knew that neither Roger, whose earnings were small, nor Maud, whose soldier husband was eking out his small pay with a smaller allowance from home, could spare anything. The great difficulty was Michael, who, unconscious of the state of affairs at home, was facing his own difficulties at Harbridge. He was to be a doctor, but how was he to become one with so small a sum to spend on his training? She spent many sleepless nights seeking an answer to the question.

As soon as possible, Mrs. Lawson and Rosie moved into rooms, and sold the house in Jardine Square with its furniture. The latter fetched very little, as most of the better things were saved from the wreck by the uncles and aunts

with whom Michael had never been able to get on. It was a tradition of the family that the relations between the members of its various branches should be strained, and the present generation had done nothing to contradict it. Now they came forward, and for the moment held out a helping hand which, however, was quickly withdrawn when, by presenting Mrs. Lawson with a few pieces of her furniture, they felt that duty had been satisfied.

A few days after the sale mother and daughter visited the house for the last time, before leaving London for a cottage that Mrs. Lawson had taken in the country. As they passed through the empty rooms in which their voices sounded cold and hollow, they were deeply moved. In the room that had been hers, Rosie stood lost in sad thoughts. Never again would she draw aside the blind in the morning to see what fortune the day held; never again would she hear the postman run up the steps, the sound of his feet awaking pleasant anticipation.

They entered the bedroom that Michael occupied during the holidays.

"What a shock it will be for him when he hears that he has no home to go to," said Mrs. Lawson.

"It does seem a shame that no one told him," replied Rosie, always eager with, or without, reason to take up the cudgels on behalf of her younger brother.

"Well, my dear, it was for his own good, you know, poor boy."

When they reached home a letter awaited them bearing the news of Michael's expulsion, and announcing that he would arrive next day. This additional blow was overwhelming. For the moment it was not the disgrace, but the inconvenience of his sudden arrival that they felt. They were to start next morning for the country, and it had been their intention to arrange for Michael to join them there at the end of the term, by which time they would have

settled down. At length, Rosie thought of Mr. Chesters, and at her wits' end Mrs. Lawson consented to her writing to ask if he and his sister could have Michael to stay for a few days. In spite of her scruples, Rosie drove her mother off next day, and waited alone to meet Michael, and to hear the result of her letter.

When the time for the culprit to arrive drew near, Rosie began to dread breaking the news to him. She need not have feared, however, for Michael, who had been picturing the meeting with his mother, was so relieved to hear of her absence that he cared about nothing else. So far as his own conduct was concerned, he was quite unrepentant, and his predominant feeling was one of relief and pleasure at leaving school. He spent the evening telling Rosie about everything; and, dewy-eyed for her Michael's sorrow, she made the tenderest of listeners. Towards the end of the evening, a telegram came inviting Michael to "The Payes," Mr. Chesters' house at Chilterford, not far from Semper-vale, and when he went to bed he felt that seldom had he spent such a jolly evening.

#### (II)

When Michael arrived at "The Payes" he was shown into the garden, where Miss Chesters was having tea. As he crossed the lawn, she came to meet him; a tall and rather gaunt old woman, whose eyes redeemed the harshness of her figure.

"You are Michael, I know," she said; "my brother told me I was to be sure and tell you how sorry he was that he could not meet you at the station. But, as you know, a man in his position, the prop as I may say of the neighborhood, has many duties to perform. And now you must come and be introduced to my niece, whom I am sure you will like."

Glancing towards the table that was arranged with its panoply of lace and silver under a cedar-tree, Michael saw

a girl occupied with the tea-things. Her back was turned, so that he could not see her face, but as he came up to her she looked up at him with a smile, and he flushed crimson.

"Isobel!" he exclaimed, cutting short Miss Chesters' murmured formalities, "you here!"

"Well, please don't faint; surely I may come to stay with Aunty Loo?" she replied.

"My dear, you know how I dislike that name, please don't—" protested Miss Chesters.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," replied her niece, "but you know what my memory is."

"Well, child, please make the tea, and then you two, since you know each other, can chatter afterwards."

"Of course we do; you haven't forgotten what a cat I am, have you?" asked Isobel, flashing a smile at Michael, who was sitting watching her with inquisitive eyes.

The four years that had elapsed since he last saw Isobel had altered her outwardly so greatly that it was not to be wondered that he found difficulty in recognizing her. In some half-conscious way he regretted the change, and realized with a pang how many would struggle to win her. He wondered how, reckless and impulsive as she was, she would bear herself.

While they sat in the deep shadow of the cedar-tree after tea was finished, Michael felt a sense of dreamy ease stealing over him, and he almost regretted that Isobel was there. He knew that he was enjoying his last hours of peace, and that whether she was kind or cruel to him, as soon as the first strangeness wore off, he would pass his days in a state of tense emotion, the strain of which would be almost unbearable. As he sat thinking, he glanced up to find Isobel looking at him, and for a moment his eyes held hers. He felt his temples throbbing and his heart was uneasy; he knew that peace was ended.

When Miss Chesters, who had been knitting with sharp

stabs as if she was a ghoul devouring rice, left them, crossing the lawn to give some orders in the house, Michael and Isobel talked in a desultory way. He asked who else was staying at "The Payes."

"Only Sylvia, and she's out with Uncle Tom," she answered, "but he says he's going to tell you to ask a friend of yours down, so that you shan't get bored by having no one but girls to speak to. *I am* rather a bore, aren't I?"

"I hardly know any friends; I doubt if they would come if they were asked"—he hesitated—"you know why I left school?"

"Of course; because you were bunked. Don't look so lugubrious—what does it matter?"

There was a pause.

"Who is Sylvia?" asked Michael, harking back.

"A cousin, but only a kiddie. She would just suit you; she has always got a face like a fiddle."

"I'm not so solemn as you think."

"Yes you are, Bony."

"I like that name."

"Well, I shan't call you it, then; you are spoiled already. Oh, wake up, wake up, Michael; why do you sit such a long way off? I shall get hoarse shouting at you."

They had been sitting in garden-chairs with the tea-table between them, but now Michael, already abject with devotion, dragged his round to Isobel's side.

"Are you sorry to see me again?" he asked.

"Awfully; what a silly you are."

As Michael sat staring at her, he felt a hot little hand slipped into his.

"Do you know, I think I'm going to be rather nice to you this time, Bony; you've improved," Isobel murmured.

For a moment Michael saw her with less biased eyes. Something hinted to him that her flippant attitude was rather overdone. Only the magnetism of her voice and

manner prevented her appearing vulgar. He seemed to see her at Jardine Square; somehow he could not imagine her getting on there very well. They would not understand her; he pictured himself making an apologetic commentary on her words and actions. His mother would be coldly disapproving; Rosie distressed and slightly hostile. It was merely a fleeting sensation; almost at once Isobel's voice roused him from his thoughts.

"Look out!"

There were footsteps upon the path behind them.

"God bless me! here's a pretty picture; I don't think we are wanted, hey, Sylvia, child? Shall we withdraw?" said Mr. Chesters, as he came round the corner, with a little girl of about thirteen hanging on to his arm. He had not much changed, but his hair was a trifle whiter, and his bearing was perhaps less convinced than it had been four years previously.

"Don't be an old goose, my dear, or you shan't have any tea. Syl, run and tell them to bring some more." Isobel took command of the party, while Michael and Mr. Chesters stood talking.

While the two truants were having tea, Miss Chesters came out into the garden again, and Michael for the first time was able to see brother and sister together. It was obvious that, of the two, Miss Chesters was the more practical, and that it was she who controlled the house, although her brother appeared to consider that she was a flighty creature, and did not hesitate to contradict her. This was especially noticeable when she referred to his social importance in the neighborhood. Notwithstanding her rather forbidding features, she was a soft-hearted old lady who idolized her brother, and considered him the most important man in the county. But she had discovered many years ago that the elder sister of a man, who is himself recklessly generous and kind, cannot afford to be the same. At first,

it had been a sore trial to her to resist all the kindly impulses that rose in her, but after years of practice she had succeeded so well that those who had not known her long, believed her to be rather a Tartar. Now she set herself to show Michael her brother's importance, lest he should not act with due reverence towards him.

"I was telling Michael how sorry you were not to be able to meet him, Tom," she said, "but that a man in your position is not always master of his time."

"Yes, I had to go and see that obstinate old mule Sarratt about his pig-styes, and I took Sylvia, as I thought it would do her good, hey, my dear?"

"I liked it awfully, Uncle Tom," replied that maiden, glowing in her chair.

Determined not to be thwarted, Miss Chesters returned to the attack.

"Oh!" she paused, contemplative, "I understood that it was to-day you had to attend the Bench." She turned to Michael. "My brother is a Justice of the Peace, as I dare say you know; of course a man in his position has many obligations."

"God bless me, indeed! Louisa, don't talk nonsense," burst out Mr. Chesters. "Don't you listen to her, Michael, ask Isobel; she knows that I am only an old fogey who wants to be left to snore in peace."

"Please don't!" replied his dutiful niece. "Last Sunday I could hear you all over the garden."

"Now then, Miss Perky!" said her uncle, thoroughly delighted. He blew his nose violently on a brilliant red silk handkerchief, and waved an admonitory forefinger at her. When he recovered, he suggested to Michael that they should look at the garden and stables.

"I'm sure Miss Lazybones kept you here so that she could eat all the cakes, and prevent her poor old uncle having any," he said, smiling blandly at Isobel.

"Do go away, Chatterbox—both of you; please do, and keep him out of mischief, Bony," she called.

"What a poppet! I think we had better get out of reach of her tongue, hey, Michael?"

Although he was the owner of a considerable amount of land in the district, Mr. Chesters lived quietly, and the stables were quickly seen. There were four horses; a hunter that had little work to do and was not in very good condition, a pair of neat carriage horses, and a light hack, which appeared was kept solely for the use of Isobel when she came upon her rare but welcome visits.

While they walked about the place, Mr. Chesters chatted about the country; the difficulties of a landowner, the state of the agricultural laborer (here Michael made use of his knowledge of Richard Jefferies) and the provoking natures of his tenants.

One man, who occupied the farm nearest to "The Payes," was not doing well although his rent had been reduced.

"I thought it was usual to remit ten per cent. of the rent for a bad year only," said Michael.

"Yes, but then he might have left and there would have been questions about the compensation, and so on."

"Do you mean to say you have to compensate a man if he fails?"

"Well, he may say that his rent was too high, and then if they decide that it was, it has to be lowered. The land-owners used to be hard on their tenants once, but now they don't have much chance. God bless me, no!"

"What awful cheek!" exclaimed Michael, to whom the mysteries of agriculture were new.

They strolled through the garden, and then sat for a time to watch the bees returning laden with pollen to their hives. "You can see the yellow above their wrists," Mr. Chesters explained.

The garden about them was hushed with the tranquil

peace of late afternoon; the birds were silent, and nothing seemed stirring except the bees that dropped heavily on to the board at the entrance to the hive. The sun, stealing through the western sky, lost its heat, and gilded the earth with its rays. Somewhere, far away along the valley, a dog barked from time to time, and the thoughts of the two as they sat upon the empty hive became more serious.

Mr. Chesters broke the silence that had fallen upon them. "I think it would be nicer for you to have a friend down here," he said; "I have to go fussing about, poking my nose into other peoples' concerns most of the day, so you won't see much of me except in the evenings."

"It is awfully good of you, Mr. Chesters, but you see they would think it bad form to keep in with me now."

"Don't you worry about that, my boy; I heard how it all happened, and you were very little to blame."

"Did my sister tell you?"

"No, no, no! God bless me, do you think I didn't know what you were doing at school? I take a certain interest in you, young man, and I kept my eye on you," Mr. Chesters smiled; "and, by the way, what do you say to calling me Uncle Tom, as those two baggages do; but, of course, not if you don't feel inclined." He appeared to be embarrassed, and flourished his handkerchief. "Surely you know some one to ask?" he continued when he emerged from it.

"Well, there's one; Standforth, though he is always called Possum—he might come, I think," answered Michael, who felt that he had never seen any one so fine and so worthy of his devotion as his kind host.

"He shall come; you wait and see. We will both write to him, and together we will get him," said Mr. Chesters confidently.

The sun by this time had passed behind the trees, and the air began to grow chill. Dew was settling upon the grass, and the influence of approaching night was in the air. A

slight movement seemed to pass through the garden, as if in flower and tree every creature for a moment stirred restlessly; it was the first breath of the evening breeze.

Michael and his new uncle left their seats, and paced through the garden down the gravel path to the lawn at the end, and then up the grass-walk between the rose trees.

Mr. Chesters broached the subject of Michael's future, and reminded him that Mr. Lawson had always intended him to become a doctor. The boy did not seem to relish the idea.

"What would you like to be?" asked Mr. Chesters.

"I dare say you will think me a young fool, but I want to be a pianist," replied Michael.

"You know the risks?"

"Oh yes, but, of course, it's out of the question; I can't afford it."

"What would it cost, do you think?"

"A good deal, as of course I should have to study for some years before I could think of appearing professionally."

"Of course I'm an old fossil with no idea of music, but I thought you had to begin young?"

"Yes, you do, but then you see I have got the worst of it over already. It would not be as if I had to start at the beginning. I can play fairly well already," said Michael, "though of course I'm not really any good." He added the last words, feeling that he was viewing the project rather too personally for one who had no hope of realizing it.

"Well, well; but you would like it; and, if you could, you would take the risk?"

"Yes, rather! I bet I'd pull it off all right if I had the chance," replied Michael exulting at the thought, and with visions of applauding multitudes before his eyes.

When they went up to the drawing-room after dinner that evening, Mr. Chesters asked Michael to play the piano. He

felt rather nervous at first with Isobel present, but acquitted himself fairly well.

"That is all very fine," said Mr. Chesters when he finished, "but let us hear what you can do in the way of twirls and trills; that is what pays."

Michael played some technical studies, exaggerating the bravura passages.

"God bless me! that's wonderful, my boy," gasped his host at the end, "a fine piece. Who is it by? Handel or some such feller?"

Feeling rather guilty, Michael murmured that it was nothing in particular, and asked Miss Chesters to make Isobel sing. While she did so, he sat entranced, with throbbing heart; she sang some settings of Herrick very charmingly in a clear girlish voice.

After that evening, Isobel and Michael were usually called upon for some music after dinner, and before the serious part of the evening began. The latter was occupied by ridiculous and noisy card games mostly invented by Mr. Chesters. They played for plums and peaches, and he insisted upon the winnings being kept on the card table where, as may be imagined, they were very much in the way.

### (III)

Sometimes as the days passed, Michael was surprised to find how completely he had stepped out of his old life. He had expected that, as a boy who had been expelled from school, he would be treated like an unclean thing. It was true that the circumstances in his case had been exceptional, nevertheless he felt that it was somehow wrong that he should escape shame as he did. No one ever alluded to it; and when people from the neighborhood came to call on Miss Chesters and asked him what he was doing, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to reply that he had left school last term, and end the matter there. His school-life

already appeared to him like a dream; it had lost the sharp outlines of reality; even the presence of Possum, who had joyfully accepted Mr. Chesters' invitation, did not destroy the illusion; for, after the first few days, with ready tact he avoided discussing Harbridge as much as possible.

When Michael first arrived at "The Payes," he was anxious to settle what he was to do in the future. His visit could not be extended indefinitely, even though his host did not appear in any hurry to get rid of him, and he wrote frequently and at length to his mother and Rosie urging them to help him to come to a decision. After a few days as Isobel's influence grew upon him again, he became inclined to consign the morrow to Limbo, in order that he might concentrate his mind on the day, and when Mr. Chesters offered to take up the question with Mrs. Lawson, suggesting that his experience would be helpful, Michael gladly left the matter in his hands.

There was plenty to occupy him in the immediate present, and with Possum for guide and companion he entered with delight into the novelty of freedom, and all the experiences of a country life. Spurred by Isobel's contempt at his lack of accomplishments, after many disconcerting mishaps, he learned to ride. He was not by any means a born horseman, and Possum and the girls had some difficulty in restraining their mirth when, bumping uneasily, he trotted past them in the paddock. But he was pleased with himself, as he meant this to be the thin end of a wedge; having proved that he could do one thing he would master everything by degrees. He was delighted, therefore, when Mr. Harrup, his old acquaintance of the dog-cart, kept his promise by inviting Possum and him to try their hand at rabbit-shooting, and he spent several ecstatic hours firing wildly at the creatures to the imminent peril of the ferrets. When he succeeded in blowing a tuft of fur from one of the rabbits' tails, his pride, although he concealed it, knew no bounds.

To crown his happiness, Isobel kept her promise to be nicer to him. She gave him many despairing moments still, but he felt that she was growing to like him more than ever she had before, and even in her maddest moods he usually managed to enjoy the spontaneous humor that prompted her every movement. Her caprice disturbed him the less because a feeling of confidence was gaining possession of him. How thin was the veil that separated him from disillusionment would have been obvious to him on several occasions, had not he been blinded by his infatuation. One such incident threw a light upon the frame of mind both of Michael and of Isobel at this time.

One morning when Michael came down-stairs, finding that he was earlier than usual and that the breakfast table was not laid, he went into the garden. For some time he strolled about looking at the flowers, but the blaze of mid-summer was over; and, as it was too early in the year for the September roses, there was not very much to admire. Down by the greenhouses he found Martin, the South-country gardener, who although long past active work still enjoyed criticizing his juniors with inflexible severity. There had been strained relations on more than one occasion between Mr. Chesters and his gardeners, because the former would not consent to banish the old man from what so long had been his kingdom.

The brightness of the morning made Martin unusually garrulous, and he was glad of a listener.

"Look yer now," he said, pointing to a glass frame as Michael came up; "time and again I've bid them be mindful to close they: but they'm so chock-full of kymistry and these yer gee-gaws, they won't mind what I do say."

He grunted indignantly; and, in order to lead him from a difficult subject, Michael asked: "You have been here a very long time, haven't you, Mr. Martin?"

"You're right there, young sir. I served Mr. Chesters

many a year, and his father afore him, so long as I mind. I be terrible ancient, I do ; and well I remember when Miss Louisa wur a slip of a maid no higher nor my spade—a rare handful she wur too ; a fine upstanding lass and a rare bonny one, though little you'd think it to see her now. Well I mind her saying, 'It's a fine lad I'll be marrying one of these yer days, Martin ; I baint gwine to bide here all my life-long,' her very words they was."

He rambled on among memories that seemed pathetic and pitiable to his hearer ; the picture of Miss Chesters as a young girl full of happy projects came as a saddening shock. After a while Michael left the old man still murmuring to himself.

Opening the gate Michael entered the paddock, intending to circle round the house before going indoors to breakfast. As he neared the corner of the field, he heard voices upon the other side of the hedge ; and, recognizing Possum's, was about to call out, but the next moment he heard Isobel reply, and paused irresolutely. Why was she down so early ? What could they be doing together ? He turned the corner quickly and came upon them. They were standing hand in hand, but as they saw him they moved apart.

"Hullo, Bony ! you are very early !" Isobel called to him.

"I was just thinking the same about you," he replied grimly. She laughed, but he noticed that Possum looked uncomfortable.

"We all seem to have been very energetic this morning," she said as he came up to them, and added in a lower voice, "Good-morning, Bony—dear."

Mollified, he walked back with them to the house.

## CHAPTER XII

### ET EGO IN ARCADIA

(I)

THERE is perhaps no country in England so well suited to the pedestrian as that which lies within the confines of Buckinghamshire; a fact that, although it lies at their doors, is little appreciated by Londoners. It is a place for the happy loiterer, the true pedestrian, who is not ashamed to idle when the hour calls, and who loves best that countryside, the features of which know no monotony; where Nature does not rule unmolested but mingles with sun-stained farmhouses, and nestling hamlets that lie among sudden valleys.

Chilterford was just such a village, and little traffic found its way along the leafy lanes to where it lay about a small green. Although it was distant barely thirty miles from London, there was nothing to distinguish it from places lying in the inmost heart of the country. Just past the square-towered church flowed the stream that watered its pastures, and the water was so clear that, from the bridge which spanned it, every pebble in its bed could be seen, its outline as sharp as if it lay in the open air. When the infrequent stranger paused upon the bridge to watch the dark fish swaying slowly in the water beneath him, the murmured chant of children in the village schoolhouse near by reached his ears. If he was lucky, he would hear them singing in the naively unpretentious voices, with which village children are able to touch their hearer's heart. This bridge was the centre of the village, of which the cottages clustered together; after crossing it the roadway, that in the village it-

self was of great width, tapered, and soon became a narrow lane as it climbed a gentle hill towards the farm called Chequers Top that crowned it.

Late one afternoon towards the end of August, when the sleepy lowing of cows in the meadows announced that milking-time was near, Isobel and Michael were to be seen walking up this lane. They appeared to be in no hurry, for they paused from time to time to look back upon the village where the children, just released from school, were running homewards, or standing in noisy groups about the street. When they reached the top, Isobel threw herself upon the close-knit turf, and fanned herself with her hand. Michael, still standing, urged her to move.

"You are the laziest of Isobels," he said, and his voice showed that their relations were far more intimate than they had been when first he arrived. "Get up and come further on. I know the jolliest place where we can sit."

"But why move when I'm so comfy?" she asked.

"Because I don't want to spend my last day sitting stuck up on a hill for all the village to watch."

"Oh, you wily old thing!"

"It's a very good reason, and what is more you think so, too," said Michael, smiling at her laughing face.

"Don't be so ridiculous!"

"Ridic'lous!" he mimicked, and she threw up her chin to gurgle with laughter.

"Sylvia is furious at my coming out with you. I made her go out with Possum this morning so that she would be tired; you see what she has to put up with, poor darling."

They walked slowly along the lane, and were soon hidden in the spinney that crowned the hill.

"Isn't it awfully good of Mr. Chesters to say he will finance me while I go in for music?" said Michael, revolving in his mind the incidents of the last few days.

"Oh, yes, it is just like him; he can't help being kind."

"You know, I hardly like to do it, but of course my mother accepted it before I knew about it, and he wouldn't listen to my protests; he got in an awful rage—you know how he does! I can't think what made her do it; it is the very last thing I should have expected her to do. Usually she is as proud as Lucifer."

"You awful boy!"

"No, I'm not; it's quite true. I can't really pretend to be sorry, because it is all so splendid; you know it's what I've been longing for almost since I can remember."

"Suppose you don't succeed?" suggested Isobel. "Lots of people fail in music simply through bad luck."

"Oh, I shall pull it off. I shall jolly well have to succeed," said Michael light-heartedly; feeling unusually confident.

Leaving the track, they roamed through the wood until they came to a fallen tree. There they sat on the ground with their backs to the trunk.

"I am glad I could come," murmured Isobel.

"Are you? do you really like me?" Michael asked.

"You know I do, very much; I simply howled last night to think you were going."

The thought made Isobel sad, and she blinked. She, too, was in a sentimental mood.

"Do you like me as much as you did, Bony?" she asked; "don't look so solemn. You don't! I know why, too—it's because I have been so horrible. I know I have hurt you; why don't you hurt me, too? Pinch me and thump me. Now, Bony, do pinch me, you must!" She was half serious, but paid little attention to Michael's protestations, and set off at a tangent.

"You *are* thin, really you are, you know; sideways you are like a knife, and you have such sad little legs."

"How dare you," he retorted, and taking her by the shoulders, shook her. She was delighted.

"Oh, you funny old thing! You've never done that before. I should love to smack your face."

"Dearest, are you really fond of me?" he asked, suddenly serious; for once she responded to his mood.

"I believe I love you," she said, very low, and staring with solemn eyes before her. Then smiling, "I see you wanted me to say it; but, Bony, I believe I mean it."

"You are laughing." He could scarcely believe possible such bliss as her words promised; but she, with tears suddenly upon her lashes, asked him:

"Do I look as if I am laughing, you old silly?" and turning darted her lips to his.

The hours sped past unnoticed as they sat there, and the sun slanting through the trees caught Isobel's dark hair in a web of glowing light. He kissed it, praising it.

"Do you like the way I do it?" she asked. "It only takes two minutes—a hundred pins. No; let's see; two, four curls, two combs which are up on top, and a slide."

Michael tried to persuade her to be serious; the sense of his approaching departure made him feel emotional, but like a wraith she eluded him. Now grave, now gay, she seemed to mock his stumbling efforts to keep pace with her varying moods, and it was not until they turned their steps home-wards that she betrayed again the fullness of her heart. Then, as they stood at the border of the trees she was all tenderness. As he stood with her, Michael felt his sadness overborne by a feeling of triumph; his wild bird was caged in his arms, and beat her wings no more.

While they approached "The Payes," Michael spoke of the future.

"You are fond of me, aren't you?" he asked; and, as for answer she touched his arm, continued, "and you will wait for me a few years? I shall work like the dickens now; with any luck, I should have enough to marry on in five or six years."

Her unexpected reply shattered his dream.

"I couldn't possibly, you old silly; I am sure I am doomed to marry a middle-aged parson. Oh, Bony, let the future be!"

The sincerity of her cry gave him a moment's hope.

"But if I had a thousand a year you wouldn't say that?"

"It wouldn't make any difference; though, of course, I could marry you then."

He was unable to understand her.

"What do you mean, old lady?"

"I mean I don't love you any less as it is. But I am glad in a way that things are as they are. I know we should make each other miserable otherwise."

He saw her eyes shining in the dusk and guessed that, although he could not understand her, she was sorry about it all. He drew her to him.

"Don't worry, put your head against me," he said.

"Oh dear, what a nice scrubby face you've got," murmured Isobel, mournfully.

When they reached the house, the moon was shedding her rays upon the roof, and the lamplight streaming from the windows barred the lawn with ruddy gold.

## (II)

At hush of dawn, the first radiance streaming above the spinnies awoke a thousand birds; the first faint chirp was echoed by another, and before long the air throbbed with their soft voices. The lark quitted the dewy meadows, and sprang to heaven showering music from the sky; innumerable small creatures stirred in the grass, and the cows opened placid eyes upon familiar pastures. The sun, as it mounted the sky, penetrated among the trees upon the hill above the village, and a faint breeze springing up rustled through the woods like a sigh.

In the village itself, a wisp of pale blue smoke began to

ascend from a cottage chimney. At the farms along the valley men began to work upon the ricks, and in the sheds. Life conquered sleep; and, as the shadows shortened, the village awoke into activity. Children came to play in the street, and women appeared at the cottage doors with brooms in their hands, or threw water from a bucket across the roadway. In the distance a wagon moved along the highroad, and through the stillness the creak of its axles could be heard. The thoughts of its driver were occupied with the incidents of his own life, those of the children with their games; each of the little figures moving in the valley possessed a separate identity, and was strangely alone.

A few hours later, when, the first activity having passed, the village had relapsed into its customary quiet, a trap was led to the door of "The Payes," and after waiting there for a time was driven off laden with luggage. As it passed along the road, imperceptibly it grew smaller; until when it turned from sight, the two persons sitting in it seemed no more than specks. The spinney was full of movement; now a dead leaf remaining from the previous year stirred with a crisp sound; now a rabbit stole through the undergrowth, or crossed the path. Overhead a squirrel tapped among the branches.

Beside the fallen tree, where the day before the two young lovers had sat, the grass crushed by their weight was already healing. A beetle crawled upon a wisp of grass that Isobel had twisted in her hands. Nature was already busy removing the faint traces of their recent presence, and the first shower would obliterate the mask of a heel, in a patch of soft ground that Isobel had crossed.





## **BOOK II**

### **Obscurity**



## CHAPTER XIII

### THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE

#### (I)

HAMPSTEAD still retains its individuality here and there, notwithstanding the invasion of Garden Suburbs, and modern houses that endeavor to represent the style of any period except their own. It seems almost as if it is struggling to retain its character as a rural suburb, and hidden away behind the spick-and-span new houses there still lurk quiet corners where the old spirit of the locality dwells apart. There may be found the delightful huddled houses dear to the heart of the sentimental, that in their mellow age put to shame the glaring imitations that surround them. There, the loiterer discovers narrow streets that end abruptly in flights of steps. Even a barn may be found, standing in a small open grassy space that is for all the world like a village green. It is not difficult, by turning down the quieter streets, to leave the bustling life of the middle-class *élite* far behind, and to find amid the houses of an ideal Victorian Age, an air that has in its sober peace a shadowy hint of the countryside.

Before the door of such a house, standing in a half-forgotten lane high upon the side of the hill below the Heath, two women were talking. There was in their ample figures and austere dress an indefinite something that evoked the word "landlady" in the spectator's mind. They were spending a few minutes after their shopping in gossip; a

very suitable occupation for the time and place. Now and again one of the women placed the basket she held upon the ground, in order the more emphatically to illustrate her words with gestures. Such crises past, she would stoop and pick it up again without checking the flow of her narrative. At length, having exhausted their store of topics, the notes of a piano which was being played in the house reached their ears.

"You 'ave a rare wonder in your first floor parlor, Mrs. Hobby," remarked the woman with the basket, holding her head on one side in order more accurately to estimate the value of the performance.

Her companion had for many years been in the habit of letting her "furnished apartments for a single gentleman" to those who intended to become professional musicians; the partial isolation of her house preventing the sound from disturbing the neighbors. She herself found no difficulty in passing her days serenely amid perpetual practising, because she was quite impervious either to harmony or discord. But, whenever musical matters were bruited among her friends, she was accustomed to take the lead, and her opinion was considered final, so that she had at length grown to believe that she was a judge of such matters.

"Yes," she decided, "I consider 'im promising; and if 'e sticks to his work, and doesn't throw it up at the last moment, as some I knows of does, 'e should do well. Not that I 'ave a word to say against 'im; as nice spoken a young man, you understand, as you could find in a long day's journey. It didn't ought to be long before 'e appears in public; only last Sunday I says to Mr. H., 'Three years 'e been here now, and it won't be many days before we see 'is 'ead on the posters in the Toob Station.'"

The music outlasted the discussion, although the latter was anything but brief and took the form of a theme with variations. The one who gave out the theme would gradu-

ally wander further from it until her companion broke in with a different statement of it. It was very pleasant in the lane; the low murmur of the women and the subdued notes of the piano intensified the silence of the surroundings. It was hard to believe that a few hundred yards away a stream of men and women was hurrying homewards up the hill.

## (II)

The room from which the music issued was plainly furnished, and the discomfort of the angular furniture was increased by the litter of music and books that lay scattered about in every available place. A large easy-chair stood beside the fireplace, and the confusion of papers, reaching its worst beside it, showed that it was frequently used. In a corner, a small writing-table stood, but the pens were dusty and the ink was caked in the pot. The greater part of the room was occupied by a semi-grand piano, seated at the keyboard of which was a young man about twenty-two years of age, with a large curved pipe in his mouth. It was the hour which Michael dedicated to scales, and it was the melody of these that a short while before had moved his landlady to deliver a favorable judgment upon his powers.

As his hands moved up and down the long row of notes, his thoughts strayed, although he tried to concentrate them upon the regularly recurring rhythm, and every now and then he swore gently as he brought them back to his work. He had not changed in appearance very much, although the outline of his features had become a trifle sharper. He did not affect any eccentricities of dress, but wore a dark-colored jacket loose in the arms. He was undoubtedly good-looking, and Milly, the landlady's daughter, had often stared with insolent admiration at his close-cropped head while she was laying the table for his meals. She was a good-natured, pretty girl, but with the coarse mouth that is so common

among those of her class. Although affecting not to notice her scrutiny, Michael had several times cast speculative eyes in her direction, but in his mind was the unspoken thought that it was rather cheap and sordid to interfere with one's maid-servants; there was also a cautious recognition of the risk attending such a course.

The three years that Michael had spent in London brought with them many disillusionments. When first he arrived from Chilterford he had felt acutely his parting from Isobel. Not only was the parting hard to bear in itself, but he took with him the knowledge that her affection for him was not of the heroic cast for which he yearned. He endeavored to console himself by the reflection that, for a time at any rate, he had won from her something that was deeper than mere affection. She who was so insouciant had thrilled in his arms; he had won that, and he believed that nothing could rob him of the memory while he lived.

At the time, Isobel's casual dismissal of his aspirations cast him into the depths of despair; but as the months passed he began to understand her better, and her composed and confident estimate of life made him smile tenderly. He felt that she had been on nodding terms with destiny; while wholly envying, he half pitied the man who eventually won her. During his first year in town they saw each other occasionally; usually Isobel wrote to say that she would be passing through London on her way from one visit to another, and that, if he was "really so desperately keen on seeing her," she would try and have tea with him, the words giving a clue to the key in which his letters were pitched. One day she did not fulfil her promise; and, after waiting at Waterloo for four hours in vain, Michael returned to Hampstead with a presentiment that the end was near. A week later he received an almost tearful letter from Isobel, in which she deplored her heartlessness, but assured him that it was no good. "I can't make myself love you, Bony,

as you are! I think I got carried away by Chilterford, it was so green; but really I didn't like you any more then than I do now. I hope we shall always be dear friends, Bony, but I think it would be better if you didn't write." She had not forgotten how to be cautious.

It was a great blow, but he hugged the certainty that Isobel had loved him for a time, say what she might, and gradually he became accustomed to her absence. Although he hardly knew it, she still influenced many of his actions, and he had fallen into the habit mentally of contrasting the girls he saw with her, as if she was the standard of desirability. He seldom thought of her consciously at this time, and when, while rummaging in his drawer, he chanced upon the only photograph of herself that she had given him, and which characteristically he did not exhibit upon the mantelpiece, it was with a shock that he realized how much she still meant to him, and he was filled with an aching regret. It was his habit of judging other girls by Isobel, as much as his innate reserve that had kept him free so far from anything more serious than a few fugitive incidents with the opposite sex. Those girls he met always fell so far short of the standard he had set up that, as soon as he got to know them, he regretted having done so. It always cost him a great deal to overcome his shyness sufficiently to speak to them for the first time; he feared lest he might be mistaken and force his attentions where they were not wanted. He found, too, that few girls had any genuine sense of humor; indeed, it was chiefly in this respect that he considered them wanting, and as a rule they represented to him no more than the attraction of sex. As he passed to and fro in the streets, he frequently exchanged glances and smiles with girls whom he had never seen before. These girls, all quite respectable and, according to their own standards, modest, appeared far more ready to make his acquaintance than he was to make theirs. He regretted that it was so much

harder to get to know men, among whom he had few acquaintances, and no friends of his own class.

Had he been asked, Michael would have answered without hesitation that the last three years had changed him little, if at all. He believed that, while by gaining experience his outlook had been widened, he regarded the world with much the same eyes as he always had done. In reality he was very different from the reserved boy, who had won his way into Mrs. Hobby's good books three years before. At that time he had been purely receptive, but, when once he found that he had only himself to rely upon, his character began to crystallize, and at the end of the period it would not have been difficult to hazard a shrewd guess at the sort of man he would become. Fundamentally he was analytical rather than synthetical; he, therefore, still showed great powers of reception and execution, but possessed little initiative. It was this trait that made him backward in forming new friendships, just as it prevented him finding any outlet for the musical impulse that dominated his brain, except through the medium of other people's creations.

So long as freedom remained a new experience, Life appeared simple, and when he answered Isobel's doubts by saying that he would "jolly well have to succeed," the battle had seemed already half won. Now, every day that passed showed Life in a more complex aspect; from certainty he passed to doubt, and from doubt to fear. Left to himself, he was apt to develop uncertainty and upon bad lines. Once before he had been roused from himself at a critical time by Isobel; now again some one was to intervene in his life, to lead him back to the path from which he was straying. But this did not happen until he had done much to alienate the few friends he still possessed.

When not compelled to exert himself by some one else, Michael was extremely lazy, and rather than sit at his table for a few minutes to write letters, he would lose a friend.

He did not do it consciously, but it was so easy to put off an unpleasant task for a day, and once put off, to forget it. When at last he determined that he would allow no more time to pass, but write at once, something would prevent him, as likely as not; it might be near his birthday and he would be unwilling to let it seem as if he was reminding people of it, or some event of importance that was approaching made him delay his letter, in order that he might describe it. So by small stages the time would pass, and he would end by forgetting all about his intention. For a short time he had thrown off his indolence, in order to keep in touch with Isobel, and had succeeded in winning the assurance that she often cried over his letters, but when he was forced to abandon writing to her, he laid down his pen, to take it up again only on the rarest occasions. During the first year, his mother and Rosie wrote to him with unfailing regularity. But, when their repeated commands and entreaties for replies failed to elicit more than an occasional note, they gradually lost touch with his life. Rosie had been the last to abandon the attempt, and when eventually she, too, ceased to write, she told herself that as soon as she had punished him sufficiently she would begin again. Other interests however, intervened, and he slowly faded from her mind as he had from that of Mrs. Lawson.

Compelled by a sense of his obligations, Michael corresponded more frequently with Mr. Chesters; but, now that there was no chance of seeing Isobel there, he steadfastly evaded all the hospitable invitations he received to visit "The Payes." A younger man than Mr. Chesters would have been deeply offended, but so great was his sympathy and understanding that he was more amused than vexed. Eventually Michael ceased to write even to him except when he received his quarterly check, which in time he grew to look upon almost as his right.

Possum, who was at Sandhurst, was less measured in his

opinion than Mr. Chesters; and, after several vivid letters and a sudden descent upon Michael's rooms at Hampstead, decided to drop him. At the end of the third year Michael was practically friendless and alone.

## CHAPTER XIV

### INVASION OF ENGLAND

(I)

MICHAEL's days were regulated with more order at this time than the state of his room would suggest. When he had a definite aim in view; above all when there was some one to keep him facing in the direction he ought to follow, he did not find it difficult to work well. Three mornings a week he set off immediately after breakfast for a private lesson with Richard Farrell; who, although rapidly coming to the fore, was not then prominent enough to dispense with his Christian name. In addition to these lessons there were various lectures to be attended, and an average of five hours' practising to be got through every day, either at the New College of Music, at which he was studying, or at Hampstead. This occupied more time than it would at first seem to do, because frequently he went to concerts during the afternoons and evenings, so that to keep up his average he had to practise during most of his spare time. The fact that he was able to obtain free passes for almost every concert to which he wished to go had been the cause of considerable pride to him when he first came to town. When he presented his blank ticket at the box office, in order that it might be exchanged for a seat, he swelled and regarded those who were waiting to pay with a patronizing eye; not knowing that such passes were to be had for the asking, and that he shared his distinction with the maid-servants of half the musical world. He had taken considerable pleasure also, in his right to buy music at professional rates, and

made use of it frequently, until he discovered that even a discount of thirty-three per cent. would not extend the purchasing power of a slender purse indefinitely.

Michael's assiduous patronage of concerts had been the cause of several protests from his tutor. Farrell, a stout man whose stumpy fingers looked as if they would have been more in place on the hands of a successful merchant, had a high sense of his duty to his art. He encouraged his pupil to go to those concerts at which eminent pianists were to play, and at which music of the highest order only would be heard; making him study the works that would be played, so that, being familiar with them he would be able more closely to follow the execution and rendering. Unfortunately, such concerts were precisely the ones for which Michael had no appetite. After listening with wrinkled brow and disordered hair to Beethoven, he came to the conclusion that his critical powers were sadly deficient, for the majority of that composer's works bored him excessively. He enjoyed mastering the technical difficulties, in much the same way as he would have enjoyed gymnastics, but as music they did not appeal to him. Farrell then unbent so far as to suggest Chopin, but it satisfied Michael no more than the fantastic cakes he ate for tea afterwards at the Vienna Café. At length he disregarded all instructions, and went guiltily to hear some of the unfeignedly jolly compositions of what was then known as the "Younger British School." He came away enchanted, and at his next meeting with Farrell formally kicked over the traces.

Farrell, who was attached to his rebellious pupil and believed that he was destined for great things, was merely contemptuous.

"Very pretty, no doubt," he said, "but I wonder you don't go to the Halls; you can smoke there."

"That's all *very* well," expostulated Michael. "I don't say that it is *really* great music; but I feel in my bones that

it is good, and I think it has opened the door to a new kingdom."

"My dear fellow, you are not concerned with new kingdoms; you must conquer the one you are in first," rejoined Farrell.

Michael subsided, and an armed neutrality came into being. He had no hesitation in saying that what he had heard was not great music, but had he thought about it, he would have been bound to confess that he had very little idea in what such greatness consisted.

(II)

The number of students at the New College of Music was almost equal to the roll of a public school, and in some ways the life was similar. There were, of course, no boarders, and the pupils enjoyed almost unrestricted freedom; but there were regular class-rooms, and the same interest was taken in all the petty affairs of daily life. Above all, the derisive and satirical attitude that was maintained towards the lecturers was very much like that in a school. There were, however, as many girls as men in the College, and the attendance—although caused by mixed motives—was voluntary. There were a considerable number of earnest damsels with determined noses and soft straw hats trimmed with Liberty sashes, who took their art with extreme seriousness, and who collected like flocks of doves in each others' studios on Sunday afternoons. There were also a lot of girls who had taken up music simply for the fun of the thing, and who were not too dignified to smile sweetly at any pleasing youth they happened to meet in the passages. These found it more satisfactory to enlist a member of the opposite sex to turn over the pages of their music for them when they were practising. It was noticeable, in the case of the girl students, that attractiveness and diligence varied in inverse ratio. All the men at the College

took a genuine interest in their work, although some of them were led astray more easily than others by the infectious indolence of the girls who went there for fun.

In addition to these mixed elements, there was the section to which Michael belonged, consisting of those who intended to take up music as a profession. These, owing to the fact that they had little time to waste, did not come much into contact with the amateurs and their luxurious music-cases.

Although Michael was to be numbered among those who had been longest at the College, he knew very little of his fellow-students. His shyness prevented him from making any advances himself, and hindered him in taking advantage of the overtures of others. On one or two occasions he had been beguiled by the friendly eyes of good-natured girls, and spent an hour or two listening to their opinions upon everything in heaven and earth, while giving them the benefit of his criticism of their playing. He was necessarily also upon terms of casual acquaintanceship with some of the men. But as a general rule he spent little time in the building, except when he was working or attending lectures. He always refused to take part in the concerts that were given once a month by the students, and his ability was in consequence little known; although Farrell occasionally spoke of him to the other men who held official positions in the College. He was a dark horse whose unknown qualities tickled no one's curiosity.

There were a number of sound-proof rooms at the top of the building, each containing one or more pianos, which were at the disposal of those students who preferred to practise there instead of at their homes. Michael made use of these a good deal; and, while he was playing, the door was frequently opened by some one who was in search of a piano, but who, finding the room occupied, quickly withdrew. There was one of these rooms for which he had a preference, which he usually managed to secure. It was

quite small, but in two of the walls it had windows which made it airy; in addition to that, the piano in it was an especially good one. In time this room began to be known as the "Lion's Den," a reference to Michael's unknown qualities; and when he stalked up-stairs to practise he rarely, if ever, found it occupied. He enjoyed the use of this room undisturbed for nearly a year, when to his disgust another claimant for it appeared. One day the door opened slightly and a round face surmounted by scrubby hair appeared; but it soon withdrew and he thought no more about it. Rather to his annoyance the unknown intruder appeared once more at the same time next day, and every succeeding day also. On one occasion as he was leaving the College, Michael saw the stranger standing reading the announcements posted upon the notice-board, and he asked the hall-porter who it was. He was able to gather nothing beyond the fact that it was "Mr. England, a new gentleman, who bin 'ere about a month."

About a week later, when Michael reached the top of the stairs on his way to the Lion's Den, he heard sounds issuing from it. When he opened the door, he saw England sitting at the piano. Feeling that in some way he was being made to look ridiculous by this tousled individual, he frowned angrily at him. The other did not disguise his delight at having stolen a march.

"I'm afraid I have got your room," he said with a broad grin.

"If it was my room I would chuck you out; only unfortunately I know as well as you do that it isn't. All the same, I really don't know why you should make a bee-line for it just at the time I am accustomed to use it," retorted Michael with studied calm.

England exploded with laughter.

"After all, it's no more mine than yours," he said. "Suppose we split it?"

His amusement was so obviously lacking in malice that Michael began to relent.

"I'm afraid I am not in the habit of splitting pianos, so I won't take advantage of your offer," he answered.

"How about Diddy Hosgood?" retorted the man in possession.

"Who is she?"

"I don't know much more than you do, but she told me that you turned over for her for two hours a short time ago; joking apart, do come in."

"If you want me to turn over, I'm off."

"No, what I want you to do is to play to me—I'm fed up with hearing myself messing about," answered England, getting up and leaving the piano vacant.

Michael had no intention of doing anything of the sort; but secretly he was flattered at the request, and before long he was giving an impromptu recital to an audience of one. He insisted on England playing also, and felt still more friendly when he found that the latter's performance was by no means equal to his own.

After a time England looked at his watch.

"By Jove—it's getting on: what do you say to some tea?"

"All right, I'm game. Where shall we go; Lyons?"

"I can't say that I am frightfully keen on them: but I know rather a jolly little place where they don't rush much—what do you say to trying it?"

Michael had no objection, and the hall-porter had the pleasure of seeing the two pseudo-enemies set out together in the best of spirits.

Tea was merely the pretext for a talk, and was soon finished. When they pushed their cups aside and were filling their pipes Michael examined the room. It was decorated in the style of a timbered cottage, but of one that had never before existed beyond the realms of fiction. There were diamond panes in the windows, and red bricks before the

hearth. It was altogether a very spick-and-span example of the imaginary olden time which draws so many visitors across the Atlantic. He heard a girl who was sitting at a neighboring table describe it as a "perfect peach of a room." Although he had known England so short a time, he noted mentally that it was just the sort of place he would admire. He was too serious to admire it himself; but the chairs, which had no pretensions, were very comfortable, and he listened complacently to his companion who was loquacious.

He gathered that England was an only son; who, with some small means of his own and the prospect of more in the future, had taken up music, not as a pastime, but because he believed himself destined to achieve fame. This ingenious young man had hesitated for a long time between the three arts of music, painting, and the drama, and had only decided to devote himself to music after preliminary flourishes in the other two. He had abandoned the Stage six months before.

"After all, you know," he said, "the Stage is not what it ought to be; there is too much pandering to the public. Now music is different; it is true that you have to buy a hearing at first, but when once you have made a name you are free to devote yourself to your art."

"I should have thought that applied to the Stage too," suggested Michael cruelly.

"Oh! Lord no; it's very different. Mind you, I don't mean to spend all my life as a pianist only. I dare say I shall write a bit; there is a tremendous opening for some one with a bit of originality, you know, and it pays like fun if once you get a start."

Michael waited patiently for his companion to exhaust himself, knowing that by doing so he would eventually get a better hearing for his own plans.

"You have been up in town some time, haven't you?"

asked England, turning to him at length, as if he had only just noticed his presence.

"Yes. I am well into my fourth year," answered Michael, and he explained that he intended to give his recital during the next season.

"Well, and let's hear how you will set about it!" asked England patronizingly. Michael was vague.

"I suppose I should have to go to an agent," he suggested; "to tell you the truth I haven't thought much about it."

"My dear suckling, do you suppose an agent would look at you unless you bribed him like the devil; how much can you cough up?"

"As little as possible—I know of course that I shall have to hire a hall, and give away all the tickets."

"Try to give 'em away you mean—my son, no one would touch them with a dirty stick. What you must do is to get some one to take you up—that's the dodge. Do you know there are people who are tremendously well known—I could tell you dozens of names—who have to go down on their knees to people to persuade them to go to their recitals. They won't do it. You know how easy it is to get tickets. I get so many in the mornings that they nearly choke me when I try to eat breakfast. You take my advice, and I know what I am talking about: get some one who is behind the scenes to pull the ropes for you. Why, even if you did get an agent to bill you for a recital, the hall would be empty except for flies. The critics would simply put their noses round the door, and then bolt; they would damn you in detail next day." He paused to flick the ashes from his cigarette with an ecstatic finger.

"If all this is true, as I have no doubt it is, it looks as if I'm pretty well dished," said Michael, characteristically regarding the most pessimistic aspect of the matter.

"True!" England sniffed; "a fat sight more true than a

lot of the bilge you hear parsons spouting. But you leave it to me; I'll do the trick."

"What do you mean?"

"You leave it to me; I've got an Aunt," (his voice evoked the vision of a portentous being). "She is a dab at the game—she knows every one, and she will simply leap at the chance of having something to do."

Michael laughed as he pictured an ample figure bounding through space.

"What's the joke?" inquired England.

"Nothing; only you are so cracked."

England looked pleased, and entered into details.

"My aunt—she's a Mrs. Innes—has days; sort of bun-worries. I lead you in one day 'Here's the wonder' sort of idea, and you will have to perform, and then I'll get her to put you up to the right people."

### (III)

Michael decided that there was probably a good deal of truth in the assertions that England had made, but he determined that he would not do anything without first asking the advice of Farrell. He broached the subject at the first opportunity.

"I want to ask your opinion," he said.

"If you talked a little less, Lawson, you might possibly play a little better," replied Farrell austerely. "Get along, and you can tell me about it afterwards."

The result was that Michael played worse than ever, because he was thinking what to say. After several protests Farrell yielded.

"Well, let's hear about it," he said in his surly voice. "I suppose you want to give a recital, or some such tomfoolery."

Michael was stung into retorting, "As you say, I am thinking of following your example in giving a recital."

Farrell laughed, and asked for details. When he heard the whole story, he advised the acceptance of England's offer.

"What he says is quite true," he said; "it is hopeless to expect anything unless you have influence behind you. I have more than once known really first-class men fail because they trusted to their talent alone. I will give you another piece of advice, though you will understand that I am speaking unofficially—leave this place. There is nothing against it as a musical college, but for that very reason it is not what you want. You must specialize. You want a better man than I am, but of course it is largely a question of means. Can you afford it?"

"I hardly know. I expect you have guessed that my funds are limited."

"If you can, you ought to go to a first-class man for a year, but even six months would make a lot of difference; and there I dare say I could be of some use. I know Busaco pretty well, and I think I could persuade him to take you as his pupil; but of course he wouldn't recognize you as such, afterwards, if you were only with him such a short time. At any rate I will see what I can do."

"It is awfully good of you, but I really have very little idea what a man like that would rush," replied Michael, a good deal tempted by such a prospect.

"He hasn't any fixed fee, and I can't tell you until I have seen him; it depends a good deal upon what he thinks of you—however, I will let you know as soon as I can. And now I must be off as I am due elsewhere," said Farrell getting up.

That evening Michael spent with the aid of a pencil in calculating how much he could spare for the famous man's purse. He was not altogether satisfied at the result, and toyed with the idea of writing to Mr. Chesters, but eventually he decided that he had not the courage to do so. He

**determined, however, that he would move into rooms a great deal cheaper than were those at Mrs. Hobby's.**

A week later he was established in a dingy house not far from the Hampstead Road. He had moved down the hill, and could no longer see the Heath from his window. He could not help feeling that he was taking the first step down-hill, in more senses than one.

## CHAPTER XV

### AT WORK AND AT PLAY

#### (I)

If all promises were fulfilled, and all good intentions carried out, men would become surfeited with blessings. There is little danger of such a dilemma occurring, however; it is so customary to confer favors in anticipation without intending to bring them to realization, that such pledges are looked upon as *façons de parler*, of no more value than the stereotyped phrases that are used in commercial correspondence. It is only the very young and the very old who have real faith in their fellows, and the two states are separated only by the missing link of oblivion. Supply the link and reverse the process of life, and no one would notice the difference; as intellect lapsed into instinct, the approach of birth would loom as terrible as does that of death. It would be a pretty sight to see men of the world fading into innocence.

Michael, who did not fall into the credulous classes, hesitated to place much reliance on the offers either of Farrell or England; and as time passed without anything further being said, he made up his mind to make the best of his position, only wishing that nothing had happened to make him discontented. He was agreeably surprised, therefore, when he received a letter from Farrel to say that Busaco was willing to accept him as a pupil, and naming a fee for the lessons that was by no means so high as he had feared it might be.

His first lesson with the great man was an ordeal, for he was very nervous; but Busaco, a tall man with a heavy, fleshy face, soon put him at his ease, and before long he began to look forward to his lessons with pleasure. He only

went once a week, but he had to work harder at other times than had been the case while he was at the College. His new master was exacting, and expected him to get through what at first appeared to be an impossibly large amount of work each week. By sacrificing some of the evenings he was accustomed to spend at concerts, Michael found that he could do pretty well; although, as soon as he succeeded in accomplishing a certain amount of work, that for his next lesson was increased. He was encouraged by feeling that he was at last doing something that really would be of use to him, and that he was more nearly a professional than he had been at the College.

It was not until he left there that Michael realized how much more than he imagined the chance meetings with acquaintances there had meant to him. Now, no sooner did he stop work than he began to feel lonely. His new rooms, although situated in a more frequented street, depressed him more than those upon the hill had done. He missed Mrs. Hobby's once irritatingly rambling speculations and reminiscences; he even regretted that Milly no longer came to lay his supper. In the evenings the street was filled with shouting children released from school, and their shrill voices were very penetrating. At intervals a barrel-organ came and played vulgar tunes with a sound like that of a mandolin made entirely of tin. After a time he discovered that this instrument of torture had regular rounds, and he made a point of leaving the house for a stroll when it was due to reach the street.

He had never many friends, but now he hardly met a soul whom he knew. Sometimes he thought of walking to the College on the chance of meeting some of his former associates, but he was so thin-skinned that he was afraid it might appear ridiculous, and he never went. Now that nothing kept it in check, his natural pessimism dominated him, and during his solitary evenings he spent many hours in morbid

introspection. He became more than ever convinced that life was useless, and with nothing to look forward to in the immediate future, he toyed with the idea of destroying himself. Usually he banished the thought, not because it was cowardly or wicked, as such he could not understand it, but because it seemed to him childish. He knew that he would never really take so desperate a step, because he did not possess sufficient physical courage. But he was not always in such a dejected condition; there were mornings when his heart sang like a caged lark; when he neglected the piano in order to tramp across the Heath with an exultant sense of power. Such moods were rare; as a rule he gazed about him with heavy eyes, and moved with laggard steps. He joined a public library and tried to banish the ghosts from his evenings by reading. The writings of the decadents appealed to him at this time, and he mouthed the honied cadences of Swinburne, Wilde, and Gautier. For a short time he played with the theories associating sound and color, and wasted his time in sketching out color rhapsodies and other bizarre creations, but such fancies were alien to him and he quickly tired of them. He was desperately in need of a companion; he considered England rather a Philistine, and a foolish one; but it would have done him good had they seen more of each other than they did at this time.

The theory, dear to novelists, that there is a definite boundary between youth and maturity is no doubt true in certain exceptional cases. But a man consists of a mature mind in a mature body, and it is sheer accident if these two should become ripe at the same moment. There must occasionally be boys whose brains, previously in a chaotic condition, are shaken into order by a critical occurrence. Frequently girls are able to achieve such mental equilibrium at a stroke. Their rearing gives them more chance of remaining ignorant of any great evil, and the sudden acquirement of this supplies the master-key that they require. Michael

was in no way like these. His evolution from childhood was so gradual that, when he was fully a man, he believed himself to be no different from the boy he had been, and he was not able to shake off an air of deference towards many who were no older than himself. He was, however, still changing. He was rising in his own estimation.

Sometimes as he passed through the streets, he looked about him and wondered how many of those who thronged round him were upon the same intellectual plane as himself, and he decided that there were few. Usually he felt that this secret sense of superiority was undoubtedly justified. He was an artist, he was familiar with books, and he had debated the issues of life; whereas the majority of those whom he saw were intent upon trivialities, and derived their only mental stimulus from a Press debased to tickle their palates. Michael's more ambitious habits were quite useless to him, but they enabled him to consider that he was one of a class apart.

The only change in himself that Michael had noticed was greatly due to his solitary life at this time. While he was at Harbridge, he possessed a certain reputation among his companions as a humorist. His wit had been of a poor class, but quite sufficient to pass as such; and at times, when in the excitement of the moment he had forgotten his shyness and found confidence in himself, he had kept a room full of boys rocking with laughter. He found now that he possessed this gift no longer; when he sought for raillery or repartee it would not answer his call. He could still enjoy humor, and his apprehension of it grew more subtle, but he could no longer create it. He considered this very distressing, and viewed his days through Youth's tragic eyes.

#### (II)

Towards the end of April, after two weeks of unusually hard work, Michael felt that he had earned a short rest.

He decided that he would spend Saturday afternoon at a concert; follow it up by a theatre in the evening, and devote the whole of Sunday to a long ramble in the country. He intended to work on the Saturday morning, but, when the time came, the idea of a seat on the Heath with a pipe and a newspaper seduced him; and, slipping out like a boy who had escaped from school, he found a shady spot under the trees where he could sit. He opened his paper and glanced down the concert notices in order to find one that would fit in with his mood.

About this time, musical circles were heatedly discussing a young man who had discovered that the accepted ideas as to concord and discord were entirely wrong. He called neither Beethoven nor Debussy old-fashioned, as some of his contemporaries were inclined to do; he waved them aside with a contemptuous hand as no musicians. Briefly his doctrine was that the octave as it stood was a semi-tone short; he applied the same principle to all the other intervals with far-reaching results. After a momentary hesitation on the part of concert patrons, he was received with open arms, and the sensation was immense. This composer, whose name was Clarence Potts, was giving a recital at Queen's Hall that afternoon, and Michael, although he pretended to be amused at the seriousness with which the affair was being regarded, was sufficiently curious to decide that he would spend his half-holiday at Queen's Hall.

When Michael arrived at the concert, he found that all the shilling seats were occupied, and he went into the balcony. For a time he listened attentively to the astonishing sounds that rose from the orchestra. He was bewildered; either the composer was a dangerous lunatic, or else he, Michael, was in some way deficient. Some of the people who were sitting near him screwed up their faces and cried out, as if the discordant caterwauling caused them physical pain; but he found that it did not affect him in that way, it

was merely unintelligible. At the conclusion of the first item which was an overture for orchestra, whistling chorus, and solo harmonium, the applause was considerable. But it was noticeable that it proceeded chiefly from the stalls; the occupants of the cheaper seats were sunk in ominous silence. As the time passed Michael's attention began to wander. He looked about him and studied the faces of the people near him; he sat and gazed at the ventilators in the roof; he carried on an imaginary conversation with Busaco, in which the latter finally gave way on all points. When his mind came back to the present, he realized that his eyes were resting upon a pretty hat, the owner of which was sitting some way off, near the centre of the balcony, and two rows nearer the front. He could not see her face, but there was an indefinite air in the inclination of the hat and the curve of the shoulders that told him she was pretty. He was pleased at finding something to do, and twisting slightly round in his seat, prepared to wait for a glimpse of the hidden features. He had not long to wait; the girl to whom the hat belonged was apparently as little interested in the music as himself, and began in her turn to look about. Her face was visible only for a moment, but what he saw was pleasing, and he waited again. The next time she looked, he kept his eyes upon her; and she appeared to notice his intent gaze, for she turned again for a moment in his direction. He knew that when once she had seen him, it was merely a matter of time; curiosity would win in the end. Shortly afterwards she casually changed her position, so that she was sitting half turned in his direction; and, looking up, she regarded him with serious eyes. Michael's heart began to beat furiously, and he returned the look with meaning, essaying a smile that was too uncertain to be successful. Before the end of the concert a secret understanding was established between them, that consisted of meaningless smiles, and the frequent meeting of their eyes.

As the program drew near its end, Michael's courage waned; he knew that he would be expected to approach the unknown and proffer tea, and he was afraid that upon closer inspection she might prove disappointing. What was more, he always felt that he appeared ridiculous upon such occasions, for he had not enough composure to meet them with ease. His feelings were, therefore, not unmixed with relief when he discovered that the girl he had been looking at was with a companion, an older woman; and when they left their seats, it was obvious that they were of a class who would refrain from making casual acquaintances, however much their inclinations might tempt them to do so. Feeling that he was safe, his courage increased again; and, as he caught the eyes of the younger of the two women in the vestibule, he contrived to look deeply disappointed. He followed them to Oxford Circus, keeping at a discreet distance, and as they crossed the road in the midst of a small knot of people, the girl in the pretty hat changed her position, in order to walk on the nearer side of her companion, and Michael managed to move near enough for their arms to touch. Half-way down Regent Street, he turned and saw them enter Fullers, where they were obviously going to have tea.

### (III)

Michael, who felt that he could hardly follow them any further, walked reluctantly back towards Oxford Street. He was disappointed at the termination of his small adventure, for she was a charming girl. But he knew that in a few days the incident would have passed out of his mind, and that if he had seen more of her he would have fallen in love, and that by doing so he would have lost his peace of mind.

As he passed the Tube Station, he heard some one utter his name, and turning, he saw England behind him. They

had not met for some weeks, and England reproached him for not writing.

"You swore you would send me a card," he said. Michael had no excuse.

"I know, but I seem to have no time to do anything, and I am a fearful slacker where letters are concerned."

"Well, I've got dozens of things to tell you. We must have tea; don't say you have no time, as you can't be so busy as I am."

Michael smiled at the other's air of importance as they went in search of a suitable tea-shop.

"What about Fullers?" England suggested.

Now that he had the opportunity, Michael felt that he could not go there. It would look conspicuous, and he could imagine the elder woman, his girl's mother probably, scanning him with disapproving eyes as she recognized him. He opposed the suggestion on the score of expense, and they went elsewhere.

England was full of his latest idea.

"I always thought that I could write, you know," he said, "and a few weeks ago I wrote a novel—dashed it off at white-heat in a fortnight, and the agent I took it to thinks there is a lot in it. He says it is dead certain to succeed, and he is very good about cash. He only wants a small fee in advance; and will let me pay the rest out of my royalties."

"I hope you aren't going to be fool enough to agree to it."

"Why on earth not?" asked England, looking hurt.

"I thought you never paid anything until the book was published. Has it been accepted yet?"

"No; at least I dare say it has by now. I expect to hear this afternoon, as I am going to see him at six o'clock. But you are quite mistaken."

Michael thought it best to let the matter drop.

"Well, all I can say is that I hope it will be a howling success," he said, and rashly asked if England had written anything else.

It appeared that nothing else had been actually put on paper, but half a dozen plays and novels were germinating, and their plots, characters and fortunes were unveiled. England, who was in fine form, illustrated the great moments with action, to Michael's deep embarrassment.

"Good, don't you think so?" he would ask after such an incident.

"Yes, thumping: it ought to pay, too."

"Oh, I'm not out for cash, though, mind you, a play that is really Good, as well as Moving, will pay like HELL."

Michael began to realize that an optimistic companion was not an unqualified blessing.

"What are you reading now?" asked England.

"Oh, Wilde, Swinburne & Co."

"Hot stuff?"

Michael was disgusted, and suggested that it was time for England to see his agent.

"Now, look here, do buck up and drop me a card to say when you are free," said England, as they were parting. "By Gad! I had almost forgotten—what a lucky thing I ran into you. I told my aunt about you, and she said I was to drag you round to one of her tea-fights; but, you know, I haven't seen you for so long that I nearly forgot. When can you come?"

"Any day: when are they?"

"She has got one on next week—Wednesday, I think."

"That will suit me all right."

"I'll drop you a line, then—so-long," and England moved off to conquer fresh woods and pastures new.

In his reserved way, Michael had not referred to the promise that England had made, until that worthy himself mentioned it; for, although he was extremely anxious to

hear about it, he was afraid that his scatter-brained friend would be overcome by remorse if it had been forgotten. Michael was apt to judge other people by himself; and, although he did not hesitate to give mankind in the aggregate a very bad character, he exaggerated the good qualities of individuals.

## CHAPTER XVI

### AN ENTENTE CORDIALE

(I)

WITH the aid of a large income and an engaging personality, Mrs. Innes made her at-homes more than usually popular. Her drawing-room was a neutral zone in which the arts and the conveniences of life could meet. She engaged some of the most eminent musicians of the day for these functions, and so high was the standard of performance that those who were invited to lend their services voluntarily, considered it the highest compliment. Her receptions were something in the nature of musical *Salons*, for at them almost every musician of repute was to be seen sooner or later. The work of a professional musician is never finished. His appearances upon the platform and his practising are the least trying part of it. Wherever he goes he must advertise himself, and he must go wherever he can to do so; the corollary being that he was to be found at Mrs. Innes'. She had a kind word for every one, but her memory was short, and no sooner did any one show that his chances of future fame were at an end, than he found the doors of her house in Buckingham Gate closed against him. There were so many successful men that no room could be found for failures; and, the fact being recognized, the struggle for admittance was keen.

When Michael and England arrived, the crush was at its worst, and the crowd in the rooms was sufficient to necessitate an overflow meeting in the hall. It took them a long time to gain the drawing-room, but once inside it they were

able to move more freely. At the far end of the room a woman was singing, and the men present were standing about uncomfortably; only those near the piano being able to hear at all well. The women, who were seated, were more resigned, and eyed their neighbors critically. When the song ended, a murmur of applause passed round; the comments "charming," and "wonderfully clever," indicating that the composer was present. As Michael's eyes traveled round the room they were arrested by a slender girl in a shady hat, who was sitting at the far end. There was something familiar about her that made him ask himself where he had seen her previously. For a moment he was at a loss; then he remembered that it was she whom he had seen at Queen's Hall the week before.

"I say, England, who's that girl over there?" he asked, but his companion was occupied with other speculations.

"Where?—you know, this is too thick; there's no chance of getting anything to eat, and if there is one thing in this house worth coming for, it's the fodder." England cast despairing eyes at the dense throng of people.

"Who is it?" repeated Michael; and in further explanation, "over there in the big hat."

"Do you mean Cicely Wantage?"

"The one who is laughing now."

"Yes, that's it: what of it?"

"I want to be introduced —"

"All right, if we can get there—but it looks pretty hopeless."

As they approached, she looked up and recognition sprang into her eyes.

"I think we have met before," she said with the ghost of a smile, when the formalities were over. She had the faintest accent, and her voice was so musical and full of modulations that Michael felt sure that she could not be English. He could not decide whether she was Scotch or French. They

murmured commonplaces for a time, until a romantic-looking youth with pale hair seated himself at the piano.

"He is a wonderful person who has discovered the musical expression of all sorts of queer things: beetles, and honey, and sunsets," Cicely explained, when the piece ended.

"I should think that was meant to be a rubbish-heap, then," said Michael.

She laughed.

"How awful you are! It's almost unpardonable to scoff."

They got on very well, and Michael as he took fleeting glances at his companion's face decided that he had never seen any one with such endearingly frank eyes.

"I do hope *Maman* ('French' decided Michael) won't come over here," said Cicely, eyeing him as she dabbed her nose with a small handkerchief.

"You are very undutiful—why not?"

"She would be sure to drag me off—she won't let me see any one, unless she has set the seal of her approval on them."

"You think I shouldn't pass?"

"She is very particular," answered Cicely, smiling mischievously.

"That is depressing."

"Do you often come here—I wonder when we shall meet again?"

Michael thrilled; he wondered whether he could suggest a meeting. His inexperience in the ways of his own class handicapped him, and he was afraid of doing the wrong thing. He had a vague idea that he ought to wait for an invitation, but he remembered Isobel; he had not known whether she would let him kiss her, but when timidly he experimented he had been successful. He wondered if the reasoning was sound.

"Are you ever in town?" he ventured.

"Oh, yes; I go in to shop—when I can escape. But you know I am rather kept in cotton-wool."

"I might see you one day—I am often about," said Michael with a fine disregard of the truth.

"Yes? I shall be up in town to-morrow to buy some clothes."

"So shall I—I wonder—perhaps we could have tea somewhere?" He felt hot and embarrassed.

"But yes, I should love to."

They had barely made arrangements, when Mrs. Innes crossed the room to them. Prompted by her nephew, she recognized Michael.

"I wonder if you would be good enough to play something?" she asked. Michael would be delighted, and Cicely looked at him with renewed interest.

He felt nervous, but an encouraging smile from Cicely made him glow. He guessed that, notwithstanding the earnest musical atmosphere, those who troubled to listen would welcome something that was not serious, and he played a little piece that bordered on the frivolous. It was a mistake; he was too inexperienced to know that it was presumptuous of him to do so, but luckily no one listened, and the buzz that greeted his performance was quite undisturbed. When he reached his seat again, he found that Cicely had vanished. While he was touring the room in search of her he met England.

"Let's clear out; we've been here hours," said that gentleman, whose appetite was still unappeased.

Mrs. Innes saw them; and, coming up, thanked Michael kindly for having played, and said that he must dine there one evening. When they reached the street England was encouraging.

"You have got on the right side of Aunt Mary: it's a bit of a miracle her asking you to feed like that," he said, and proceeded to cross-examine Michael upon his doings.

"Did you see Gerrard? Not! Good Lord, you must collar him as soon as you can; he's the critic for the *Morning Wire*: unless you can get on the soft side of him, you've no chance of doing anything at all."

"Oh, I say, steady on!" protested Michael, to whom such a state of things seemed impossible.

"Well, perhaps it's not quite so bad as that; but when a new man has really good notices it usually turns out that he is a friend of Gerrard's, and it is quite certain that if any one happens to annoy him he will get fairly flayed."

"But after all the *Morning Wire* isn't everything—there are plenty of other good papers."

"Yes, my son—but none of their critics know the difference between a crotchet and a cocoanut; they all sponge on Gerrard for a tip. The sooner you get hold of him the better; and, when you do, just sit like a bally fish with your mouth open, and swallow whatever he says."

After they parted, these sage admonitions troubled Michael little; he had other things to think of, among which a small nose and a couple of friendly eyes shaded by a large hat held a prominent position. Cicely's voice sang in his ears, and he repeated the words she had said under his breath, smiling at the piquancy of her enunciation. When he reached his rooms, he found that he could not settle down, either to practise, or to read. A hand seemed to pluck at his heart-strings, drawing from them strange throbs that stifled him. The morrow seemed so far away.

## (II)

Michael arrived at the corner of Bond Street, the appointed place, a quarter of an hour too early, having hurried for fear of keeping Cicely waiting. He felt miserably conspicuous as he stood gazing intently at the omnibuses, in the hope that he might appear to be waiting for one. After a time, he grew more at his ease, and looked

about him in order that he might walk to meet Cicely when she came in sight. When she did come, however, he saw her only when she was close to him. She was late and full of apologies. He felt nervous, and wondered if he ought to suggest a taxi; but she preferred to walk, and he suggested the tea-rooms to which he had gone with England the day on which the latter had usurped the Lion's Den. By the time they reached them, they were back upon the terms of the previous day. He wondered whether he might venture to call her Cicely, but the name choked him and he decided upon neutrality.

"I couldn't find you when I finished playing," he said.

"Oh, bother! I know, I was led away, but I heard you and it was beautiful; I love music."

"Do you really? but why 'bother'?"

"I don't know—it was such a pity."

Then he returned to her previous remark.

"What sort of music do you like?"

"Oh, all sorts—good music—Beethoven—Mozart."

"Yes? but do you like any of the more modern sort?"

His voice was indifferent, but he awaited her answer with anxiety. If their tastes were similar, what a companion she would be!

"Yes. I love Grieg—don't you?"

"Yes." He smiled wryly. After all, there were other things besides music in life.

The tea was a great success. Cicely fell in love with the room, and would not listen to Michael's slighting comments. Her position changed for him; from a divinity she became a little darling. He regarded her with sentimental and slightly patronizing eyes as she ate little sandwiches. She had a trick of meeting them with the smallest tip of a pink tongue as she opened her mouth, and he could not keep his eyes from it. As she was putting on her gloves, her hand-kerchief slipped from her lap.

"Oh! *mon mouchoir*," she murmured in agonized tones, and when he restored it she thanked him with fervor. He felt that he was getting on.

"I say, I'm sure you are French, aren't you?" he asked, trying to cover the clumsiness of the question with a smile.

"No—no, I am Eeenglish—you are rude!" She twirled the initial letter.

"Am I? I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to be, but I'm afraid you will think me even ruder when I say that it's jolly hard to believe it."

"My father was born in Sussex."

"But your mother?"

"I didn't say my mother—but you are right; all the time I was a *bébé* I lived in France."

"I knew it! Your voice is so jolly."

"Is it? Oh, bother!"

He learned more about her life, before she discovered that she must fly as she was going to a dance, and it took so long to dress. Her mother was a Frenchwoman, and she herself had been educated in a convent in that country. Her parents had lived chiefly abroad, so that until quite recently she had been more accustomed to the French language.

When they parted at the Station, Michael fancied that her hand answered the pressure of his own, and he returned home elated.

They met again in a few days, and their intimacy grew so quickly that it left them breathless. When, one day, upon the stairs of the Tube Station at Baker Street, they kissed each other for the first time, they were both astonished to find how short the time was since they met at Mrs. Innes'. Cicely did not seem to have much difficulty in escaping from the vigilance of her *Maman*, which, although Michael never suspected it, was largely an effort of Cicely's imagination. She thought that it might be desirable to have

an excuse for ceasing to see Michael should he prove uninteresting. When she found that such a precaution was unnecessary, she still kept up the pretense because the spice of secrecy added a flavor to their romance. Mrs. Wantage was in reality a voluble and good-natured woman; and, when some time after this her daughter asked her to invite Michael to the house, she did so without demur, and praised his playing with such evident sincerity that Cicely, who until then had been paying more attention to Michael than to the music, wondered if he might after all become famous. She glanced at him with intent eyes. Until her mother thus put the idea into her head, she had never seriously considered the possibility of marriage. She was so far typical of her age that, while fully determined to have a good time and put no premium on her kisses, she did not consider such familiarity necessarily bound up with any serious issues. When Michael was with her there was an unspoken understanding between them that their idyll would one day come to an end, and neither of them had seriously wished that it should not. They did not care to consider the matter, and reserved such thoughts for a distant and undefined future.

Mrs. Wantage was going to give a dance for Cicely a little later in the season, and, in an access of friendliness she invited Michael. It was not until he had accepted that he remembered he could not dance, and when the formal invitation arrived it was too late to refuse. He considered the desirability of illness upon the night in question, but prudent forethought on account of his concert, rather than the desire of being with Cicely dissuaded him from such a course, and he decided to take lessons in dancing. He could not afford to attend a good place; consequently he spent half a dozen evenings with pallid shop-girls, after which he was a guaranteed adept in the valse, reverse, two-step, and one-step. The barn-dance and polka were favorites with the other

pupils, but with instinctive judgment he decided not to acquire them.

The dance brought matters to a head. Michael was not accustomed to such things, and the excitement of the evening carried him away. After the first few minutes, he plunged into the unreal world about him. Flinging work, Busaco, and all the incidents of his every-day life behind him, he moved the equal of those about him. He tasted the sweets of prosperity, and the alluring thrill of the valse-music mounting to his head like wine intoxicated him. It was some time before he was able to approach Cicely, but she had reserved part of her program for him; and, as they moved off for their first valse, she was so sympathetic that he confessed to her the fact that he had never been to a dance before.

"One would never guess it," she replied, and he rose greatly in his own estimation. From that moment, he forgot his tie which had shown a tendency to slip, and he gained confidence in himself.

Michael did not dance badly, and had there been no one else in the room, Cicely's praise would have been justified. But he was clumsy in guiding her among the other couples who were dancing, and he soon left everything in her hands. She found it tiring and proposed a rest. As it was her own house she knew where to take him, and had in reality made arrangements with an eye to such possibilities. Michael was punctilious, and inquired about her next partner.

"Oh, that's all right," replied Cicely, "he will never find us here!"

Michael was rather astonished at her nonchalance; but more pleased, and feeling that he had done his duty he let the matter drop. Indeed, he was not at all anxious to hasten their departure. Until now, he had never seen Cicely in an evening frock, and her daintiness was a revelation, holding him spellbound. He claimed a kiss; and, as

she ungrudgingly gave it, his eyes for a moment rested upon the gentle dip of her breasts; he felt as if he had committed sacrilege. Her voice recalled him to himself.

"Do be careful of my hair!" and, smoothing it after his caress, she asked, "Do you like my frock? I chose it for you."

By the time they left their retreat, she had promised to be his wife some day, when he had become famous; and until then they were to be engaged secretly. He had never meant such a development to take place, and no sooner had they left their retreat and returned to the ball-room than he felt cold. It was not that he did not care for her—he did, and until then he had believed that he loved her; he delighted in her presence, and a note in her handwriting made him thrill. But when once he was committed, something that had been lurking at the back of his mind, when he had gladly met her attitude of living only for the present, revealed itself. He knew that even a secret engagement would hamper him; he felt that Cicely was not the girl who would spur him to great efforts. He had read somewhere that if a man had the slightest doubt as to his desire for a girl he did not love her, but he did not require that to tell him that he did not love Cicely. How it was he did not know, but he felt in his bones that he was not destined for her.

Had Michael cared a little less, he might have written as soon as he got home after the dance to tell Cicely that he was mistaken, and that he asked her forgiveness. But he was afraid of grieving her, and rather than do that he let the opportunity pass. The romance having evaporated from his heart, he became intensely materialistic. Cicely, he knew, was two years older than himself, and he writhed as he pictured her at their marriage in ten years' time. He discovered that girls age more rapidly than men, and almost

wept over their hard lot. Their youth seemed no more than a quickly-turned page, and he imagined with what horror they must view its approaching end. He was at this time very absurd, and a comical spectacle, but it made matters no more pleasant for him.

It was only natural that his work suffered. He took revenge on Fate by being idle; and that, in the face of his rapidly approaching concert, was a serious matter. Busaco was not long in discovering that something was wrong, and strongly suspected that a girl was at the bottom of it; but, experience having taught him that artistic folk were kittle-cattle, he contented himself with delivering a jeremiad upon the subject of women in general. Michael, who was as sensitive as touchwood, saw what was in the wind; but, feeling that the world had treated him ill, he was touched by the consideration the other had shown, and he listened in silence, heartily endorsing what was said, but considering that his was a far worse plight than that of the unfortunate men who were mentioned.

### (III)

Many young people become entangled in ill-planned love affairs because they have no other medium of expression, through which they can relieve themselves of their surplus comprehension of beauty. The sight of a beautiful thing causes a void to be felt, and they say, "How lonely am I; how sad it is to be without love," with the result that they fancy themselves enamored of the next member of the opposite sex who crosses their paths. Had they a taste for versifying, hard work, or strumming, they would forget their grief after half an hour of maudlin ecstasy. For such as these, there is a simple antidote which acts upon the blistering principle—the sight of another Fair. Their complaint is *femina*, or love in the abstract, and they care little whether they sigh for Joan or Marjory. Each is in turn

equally charming and inevitable—that the last was so, is forgotten. It is only with maturity that this sentimental agility is lost, and the need of the individual becomes inconsistent.

Michael, who had not the excuse of idleness, was the victim of his solitary habits. His loneliness, although the result of his reserve, was distasteful, and he longed intensely for a companion to share his thoughts and aspirations. His weakness for pretty faces trapped him into believing that they were possessed by the kindred spirits he sought. He was quite aware of his weakness and knew, even while courting disillusionment, that he would soon be disappointed; but he had not the strength to turn back. Had the girls he circled round been as changeable as himself, all would have been well; but they seemed to have a habit of falling in love with him just at the time when he was meditating retreat, and that complicated matters.

Cicely was no exception. When once she closed her eyes to discretion, she allowed herself to be carried away, with the result that she fell deeply in love with Michael. He had not the courage to admit that he had changed, and he struggled to appear devoted. His lack of responsiveness to her advances genuinely distressed him, and he tried to force himself to love her. Of course it was quite useless, but he did not desist. He saw her as little as possible; and, when she pouted, pleaded the necessity to work, but in reality he did nothing of the kind. He could not concentrate his thoughts upon anything so dull, and more often than not he decided to postpone practising until he felt more in the mood, so that the days slipped past and left his piano as silent as they found it. He was in a panic, and could have dreaded the future no more if he had been betrothed to a leper. He quite recognized that Cicely was a pretty girl, and that many men would have envied him his fortune had they known it, but he could not infuse warmth into his

thoughts of her. While she was present, he half believed he loved her, but no sooner did she pass from sight than a feeling of indifference crept over him. At times he wondered whether the mere fact of his being definitely plighted accounted for this, and whether his love could only flourish unchecked.

One day he took Cicely for a walk. They took the train to Rickmansworth, and skirting the Chalfonts, returned to tea at the Old Tannery. Michael was feeling depressed, and could not cast off the cloud that weighed upon his spirits. He found himself thinking constantly of Sempervale, not a dozen miles distant, and blamed himself for having proposed that the expedition should be in its neighborhood. As they were returning, they had to cross the hills, and, when they reached the highest portion of the path, bidding Cicely wait, Michael walked to the summit of a hill, and gazed towards the Vicarage. He could not see the valley in which it lay, but the thought of its nearness saddened him. When he heard Cicely call to him, he murmured, "Good-bye, Isobel," and then, abruptly turning, ran down to rejoin his companion.

"Whatever were you up to?" she asked.

"Nothing—I only wanted to see a little village where I used to live—you know, Sempervale—I told you about it."

Cicely was satisfied with the explanation, but she wanted to be petted, and as Michael showed no disposition to loiter, at length she suggested it herself.

"If you are good, I don't mind sitting down somewhere for a bit, as it is quite early," she said.

"It would be awfully jolly, but, to tell you the truth, I am so beastly peckish that I can think of nothing but tea just now," answered Michael, and, feeling that his words were brutal, he stopped and kissed her. A few weeks ago he would have jumped at her proposal, but there is no one so cruel as a wearied lover.

Cicely put her arms round him—a thing she would rarely do—and looked up at his face.

"You do love me?" she asked.

"Of course I do."

"As much as you used to?"

"What have you got into your little noddle now?" he asked, trying to evade her question.

"But do you?"

"Yes."

"Not more? Oh, Michael dearest, you must forgive me for being so silly, but somehow you seem changed. Surely I haven't done anything to annoy you? Nothing could come between us, could it, dear?"

He tried to reassure her, but even to himself his words lacked conviction, and his kisses fervor. The day was spoiled for Cicely, and she became unusually quiet. It was noticeable, however, that as they neared the town Michael's spirits rose, and at tea he was very lively.

He was slightly relieved to find that the train home was crowded, and that they could not secure an empty compartment. As he sat in his corner, gazing with vacant eyes from the window, he reflected that life was very difficult.

## CHAPTER XVII

### HUNGER REJECTS HUMBLE-PIE

#### (I)

THE unknown quantity in the equation of the future, that forms the basis of so many pleasing calculations in uneventful moments, is apt to wear an ominous aspect in times of trial. To the prosperous, every tree bears a finer fruit than the last, and even in the face of approaching adversity it is comparatively easy to conjure with hope. But when once misfortune is come, the world turns dark upon every side, and the almost certain knowledge that it will grow darker before dawn, preys upon the mind. Hope and despair are so nearly associated that it is seldom possible to say where the line of definition lies. In fundamental things, it is always the poles that are most nearly kin.

When Michael reached home after his walk with Cicely, two more complications awaited him. The first, a note from Mrs. Innes, was, in its phrasing, innocuous enough.

"DEAR MR. LAWSON,

"I hope you have not been waiting for a formal invitation to come over and see us, but we should be so pleased if you could dine with us on Tuesday at 8:30. We shall be quite alone, and I hope we shall be able to prevail upon you to play to us.

"Believe me,

"Sincerely yours,

"MARY INNES."

The other, a typewritten letter from his agent, announced that a hall had been secured for his recital, and that nothing except his approval was required in order to arrange the matter.

In ordinary circumstances, neither of these letters would have been disturbing, but now, although neither of them con-

tained bad news, they were both profoundly vexing. The cause of the mischief was a letter that had not arrived. It was the first time that Michael's check from Mr. Chesters had been late, and the fact served to emphasize the delay in the present instance. With money in his pocket he would tilt his cap at Destiny, as personified in Cicely, but without it a dozen difficulties confronted him. He paused, and decided that, as things stood, he had just sufficient money saved to carry him through the concert, and perhaps to provide him with a few meals afterwards. That was not enough. He was determined to succeed, but he was not so foolish as to suppose that engagements would flock upon him directly the concert was over, although he thought that, with good notices at his back, he would soon be able to earn a little money.

He decided at length to wire to Mr. Chesters for news of the delayed check, and had actually started for the post-office when the explanation flashed upon him. He remembered that the arrangement had been that he should be financed for four years—three for work, and one for emergency. The scene in the garden rose before his eyes, and again he saw himself explaining that in four years he was bound to be in an independent position. It was the extra year with Busaco that had thrown his calculations out. It was, of course, unlikely that Mr. Chesters, in the ordinary way, would have terminated his help without giving him any notice of his intention, but he guessed that it was done to remind him how little gratitude had been shown to the donor. He felt no remorse as the situation became clear to him, but a sullen rage grew in him. He became what, in little boys who will not admit themselves in the wrong, is known as sulky. He was not going to eat humble-pie; he would go through with it, and show them what he was made of. One day he would have the laugh of them.

Notwithstanding this heroic attitude, he was alarmed to

think how entirely he was dependent upon Mr. Chesters. He knew that should anything happen he could not apply to his mother, for if he did she would be unable to help him. The money in his pocket, and the possibilities that lay in his concert were virtually all that lay between him and starvation. He could not believe that Mr. Chesters really intended to terminate the allowance for good; he felt that this was only a warning. Had he believed that his benefactor was in earnest, he might have swallowed his pride and asked forgiveness; but he could not brook warnings, they savored too much of the schoolroom. Shutting his eyes to the weak points of his position, he wrought himself into a fine state of rage, and strode through the streets vowing vengeance upon Destiny.

When he arrived back in his room, he felt strongly inclined to refuse Mrs. Innes' invitation, and trust solely to his own powers. Discretion at length prevailed, and he wrote to accept; knowing well that by doing so he was securing a valuable ally, who would see that he did not play to an empty hall when the time came. Whilst realizing the prudence of his action in that respect, he knew that Mrs. Innes would also form an additional fetter to bind him to Cicely. So far as that aspect of the question was concerned, he regarded it very much as he would have done had his fiancée been a dose of medicine. He felt that it would do him good if he was pledged to her irrevocably, and that the knowledge that there was no escape would bring with it resignation. He was a fit subject for pity, as he sat revolving his plans in the dingy room with its horsehair stuffed chairs. His difficulties were largely the creations of his own fancy; but to him they were of vital reality and importance, and for that reason they were worthy of respect. The fact that he was working out his destiny, and acting upon the dictates of his character, ennobled his struggles.

Michael left the letter from the agent unanswered, in order that, in a personal interview, he might have a better opportunity of seeing how he stood. His finances were not sufficiently involved to prevent his knowing the true state of his purse; but he went into his position again in order that there might be no mistake. He was thankful that he had been prudent enough to save; had he not done so, humble-pie would have been inevitable. As it was, he decided that he would be able to hold to his intention of giving his concert unaided. In the morning he set out to see Mr. Freybourg, his agent.

As Michael had not made an appointment, he had to wait an hour and a half. He sat in the comfortable waiting-room looking at the illustrated papers that were lying on the table, reminding him of visits to the dentist. When first he arrived he was feeling quite collected and ready for anything. But as the time slipped by, he found it increasingly difficult to adhere to the resolution he had formed not to think of the coming interview. His courage gradually deserted him, and he began to question the wisdom of the step he was taking; he wished he had never come. At length when he had just determined to brave facing the clerk in the outer room, and slip away without having accomplished the object of his visit, the door of an inner sanctum opened, and Mr. Freybourg emerged chatting to a resplendent dame, whom he showed into the lift with extreme politeness. When he returned he invited Michael into his room.

"Mme. Claire-Roi," he murmured, referring to his late companion, "a charming woman."

Michael was suitably impressed, and the other, knitting his brows, brought his mind to bear on the matter in hand.

"I was expecting to hear from you this morning, Mr. Lawson," he said. "Of course you will realize that it is not safe to delay in snapping up this chance?"

Michael was rather disconcerted at having the object of

his mission thus brushed aside before he had time to broach it.

"To tell you the truth, I was hoping that it might be possible to leave it open for a few days," he said.

"My dear Mr. Lawson! I assure you it would be quite impossible. You are rather late to secure a good hall as it is; in another week or so they will be booked two, or even three deep, on every day during the season. I should strongly advise you to fix upon this date at once before it is too late. Of course, if you would prefer to let the matter rest until next season, I shall be very happy to arrange accordingly."

"I was merely wondering whether I could leave it unsettled for a few days—I should at any rate decide upon one day this season," faltered Michael, overborne by the other's confident manner, and feeling as if he was guilty of something.

"Quite out of the question, I'm afraid," rejoined the agent, mentally deciding that his client would not go far if he was accustomed to hesitate in that way.

In desperation, Michael plunged.

"Oh, well, in that case we had better fix it up at once," he said, reflecting that if the worst came to the worst he could bolt.

As he was shown out by the clerk, Michael wondered if he would ever be sufficiently important for his prosperous agent to consider it worth his while to be obsequious to him.

## (II)

The evening at Buckingham Gate was not a success, although at first all went well. Michael was embarrassed by the splendor of the house, and was miserably conscious that he did not appear at his ease. Several times during dinner he was obliged furtively to watch his host, in order that he

might discover the correct way to manipulate the food, and he was astonished to find that Mr. Innes usually adopted the method which seemed most vulgar. Secretly Michael hoped that no idiosyncrasy of the other would betray him. He had an embarrassing moment when he was asked what he would drink, and his efforts to appear unconscious of the mentor at his elbow by talking brightly to Mrs. Innes proving fruitless, he chose Hock.

After dinner, Mr. Innes endeavored to discuss music, but his ideas upon the subject were few, and he was reduced to asking several times after Michael's general health and plans. He soon abandoned his efforts to appear musical, and became far more pleasant when he turned frankly to the subject of golf. Michael's conception of the game was vague, but by listening intently and introducing as his own, variants of the other's observations, he found that he was able to keep his end up. Nevertheless, he was relieved when a move was made to the drawing-room. Mrs. Innes, who had been working hard for some weeks at a new sonata by Clarence Potts, wanted Michael's opinion of the result, and went to the piano. At the end of the first movement, her husband, who had been studying the fire, realized that a comment was expected, and said in a hearty voice:

“Well, my dear, you seem in a great stew.”

“Oh, Dick, you are too bad!” she protested, too deficient in humor where her music was concerned to be amused.

“Isn't he a boor?” she asked, turning to Michael, who did not know how to pass it off, and felt uncomfortable.

Mrs. Innes refused to play any more, and Michael took her place, but the evening was doomed to interruptions. Before he had been playing long, Gerrard came in, and his efforts not to interrupt were, if anything, more trying than Mr. Innes had been.

When Michael joined the others in front of the fire, Gerrard, who had just left a concert at which some new

works had been performed, was giving his opinion of them and condemning them as lacking originality.

"I must say it seems to me that originality isn't everything," said Michael, who often had been irritated by Gerrard's notices in the *Morning Wire*.

"No, of course it isn't," the other replied, "but when one hears a man ladle out streams of Debussy and Elgar, who don't mix, one can hardly hail him as a heaven-sent genius."

"I should hate to give any one a bad notice if I were a critic," interposed Mrs. Innes. "Just think what it means to them, poor things."

"You would be very much in request," rejoined Michael, and returned to the attack. "You know, though I can't pretend to know much about it, it seems to me that composers have rather a rough time of it. If an author writes well, it is considered complimentary to say that he is almost Shakespearian, or whatever the case may be. Whereas, when an unfortunate composer lifts up his voice, the mere murmur of another composer's name is sufficient to turn him to contempt. It seems to me that if a man can write like Wagner or Debussy, he should be praised and not slated."

"Well, every one has his own opinion," sneered Gerrard, who was very touchy. "I have given you mine for what it is worth."

"What do you say to a rubber?" inquired Mr. Innes, who was frankly bored.

Michael could not play, and innocently broke up the party.

"I must be off, too," said Gerrard, but he remained long enough to remark that he considered Michael "rather a young cub."

"Oh, I think he's such a nice boy," protested Mrs. Innes. "Now mind you are kind to him; you know he is giving his first recital next month."

"We shall have to see what he is worth, and you mustn't try to corrupt the Press," replied Gerrard smiling.

## (III)

The days that followed gave Michael plenty to do, and he had no time to think of the future. His agent did not waste time, and a few days later Michael saw a poster at Oxford Circus Station, upon which was a large photo of himself and an announcement of his recital. He stood looking at it, until he realized that he would appear foolish to any one who might recognize him. But the incident gave him confidence, and his importance seemed increased. Until then the whole affair had seemed rather unreal, and it was almost with a shock that he realized how near it was. "MICHAEL LAWSON: PIANOFORTE RECITAL," he murmured to himself, and wondered how the name sounded to other people; it did not seem to possess the inevitable sound peculiar to the names of great men.

Michael was chiefly occupied with the pieces he was to play at the recital, and constant practise made them almost nauseating. Busaco warned him to be careful that he did not become stale by too much work, and he decided to take a complete rest upon the day preceding the concert. Sometimes he wondered that he did not feel more nervous; but, except upon the occasion when he first saw the poster at the station, he found it hard to realize how much depended upon his performance. It was a desperate bid for fortune; on the achievement of a couple of hours he would be judged by a tribunal from whose verdict there was practically no appeal. If he played badly that day, he might very well never recover the ground he would lose by doing so. There seemed so much to do, that he had no time to think about abstract matters. The excitement of the last days of preparation braced him; and, when he rose in the

mornings, it was with a zest for life, and an alacrity that he had not experienced for a long time.

On Sunday afternoon, that is to say the day before the recital, Michael called at Buckingham Gate and there found Mrs. Wantage and Cicely. The latter was looking unusually pretty; the faint flush that mantled her cheeks when Michael entered made her look very girlish. She was full of interest in the recital; and, as soon as she could catch his eye, brought him to her side. Several times while they were talking, Michael looked up to find her eyes resting upon him with a gentle and insistent gaze, as if her spirit had mounted to them and sought to hold speech with him. The quiet house, the prosperous ease of everything within it, and the graceful movements of Mrs. Innes as she poured out the tea, contributed to a sense of well-being that stole over him. He felt as if he was an old friend, and he seemed to have heard the low tones of Mrs. Innes' voice for a long time. The mantle of his sorrows fell from him, and he felt a sheer physical comfort in the consciousness of his body. Sitting side by side, he and Cicely seemed isolated from the other people in the room. He grew tender. Her gentle ways and piquant enunciation suddenly became inexpressibly captivating: he yearned for her with a feeling that was more akin to pity than to love. He wanted to protect her—she seemed such a child.

"We shall have to live in a cottage when we are married," he murmured, unable to help himself.

"Why not?" asked Cicely, her glowing eyes showing how he had pleased her. He knew that he did not mean what he said, but he could not resist the temptation of pleasing her, even at the cost of future pain.

When they parted, he held her hand tightly and gazed into her eyes. For him it was a fateful moment; for her a delightful prelude to future caresses. Had they known, it was the last time they were to meet so intimately.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### PRIDE'S PURGE

(I)

THE outstanding feature of the concert was the fact that it cost fifty-five pounds, and left Michael with very little more money than was sufficient to pay his landlady's bill and keep him for a fortnight after the event. As soon as it was over, the monetary aspect of the question loomed on the horizon with disconcerting clearness. The concert itself possessed few distinctive features. The hall was rather less than half filled; and the bulk of those, only too few in number, who paid for their seats had been cajoled or bullied into doing so by Mrs. Innes, who had always liked Michael, and who, after his conflict with Gerrard, had been indefatigable in his cause, guessing rightly that the result of the concert would be of the first importance to him.

There was nothing in the performance to lead people to suppose that they were listening to a genius. A few of the girls present, to whom Michael's boyish good-looks appealed, clapped with some show of spirit; but as a rule the applause would have languished, had it not been for the group of claqueurs in the stalls. England, who had spent half a crown in the cause of friendship, disconcerted the audience by calling lustily for an encore from his seat in the balcony; but the reluctance of the rest to take it up damped his enthusiasm, and he subsided into gloomy abstraction. Michael did not play badly, but he did not play as well as he was able to, when he was on his mettle. After all the excitement that had preceded it, the event itself seemed to come as an anti-climax. He felt in his bones that, do what he would, it would be impossible to move the audience to any show of

enthusiasm. With an unfortunate choice of occasion, he fancied that the world was a useless place, and that it did very little good to struggle against adverse Fate.

When the concert was over, Mrs. Innes and Cicely with a few other people, none of whom Michael knew at all well, came round to congratulate him. England, in a sudden access of candor, felt that he could not honestly say anything satisfactory, and kept away. Cicely was excited but she had been half expecting that Michael would receive an ovation, and was rather disappointed by the small show of enthusiasm. She lingered after the other people left; and Mrs. Innes, with whom she had come, hinted more than once that she was acquainted with the relations between the two.

"Now the fight begins," she said to Michael. "You have given your recital, and now you must make other people ask you to play at theirs, and pay to come and hear you when you give another."

He agreed wanly, and wondered how on earth he was going to keep alive in the meantime. On his way home, he estimated his resources and found that he possessed six pounds ten shillings and fourpence, to which he could add a little by selling some of his things. It was clear that he must act promptly, and that night he wrote to half a dozen agencies in the hope of obtaining a few casual engagements, the proceeds of which would help to keep him going. He delayed posting the letters until the morning in order that he might insert any press notices that were complimentary. In the end he sent the letters as they were. When he read the criticisms in the newspapers next morning his heart sank, for he realized that he was in a really serious position. The stereotyped praise of the people he saw after the concert had inflated his hopes, but a perusal of the *Morning Wire* acted like a pin upon a balloon. He was only accorded a few lines at the bottom of a column, following an important notice of the recital that had preceded his own.

"At the same hall in the evening, a recital was given by Mr. Michael Lawson. The program was well chosen, but the recital giver did not do it full justice. Mr. Lawson possesses considerable technical ability, but the effect of his performance as a whole was unconvincing. It is only fair to add that he did not appear to be in his best form, and there was sufficient promise in his appearance last night to justify the hope that after a few years' more study he may become a pianist of some repute."

The other papers in some mysterious manner seemed to have discovered the way the wind blew, and almost without exception adopted an attitude of rather contemptuous encouragement. As he read through them, Michael scratched his head and swore with some fluency; but his heart was like lead, and a despairing sense of helplessness crept over him. The worst of it was, he felt that there was a good deal of truth in what was said; he had not the consolation of considering himself a martyred genius. His landlady coming in with his coffee asked how the concert went off.

"I'm sure, sir, I 'ope it was a great success."

"Oh, it was all right," replied Michael, adding to himself, "you loathsome old beast!"

"Was there any encores?"

"Yes: for heaven's sake go away," snapped Michael.

He felt an idiotic desire to throw something at the woman. When she had gone, he cut a slice of bread with savage energy, and determined to think about something else. He found it quite impossible to do so, for his thoughts scampered about like mice in a wainscot. Crossing the floor, he stood staring blankly out of the window, until the sound of some one on the stairs made him dive for his hat and leave the room in order to avoid having to talk.

(II)

The only engagement Michael obtained was to play at one of Mrs. Innes' at-homes, and the fee of ten guineas that he

received for doing so was very welcome to his emptying purse, and enabled him to live for nearly a month. It would have lasted him longer had it not been for Cicely. She announced that now the recital was over Michael had no work to do, and consequently no excuse for not seeing her. He was so taken aback that he acquiesced, and by so doing made himself liable for a considerable number of teas at expensive places, and for an excursion into the country one afternoon that cost nearly thirty shillings. It was clear that such a state of affairs could not go on. Ten guineas would not last forever, and his clothes were beginning to look shabby, a fact Cicely commented upon in amused protest.

"I really think you might brush your things before you come to see me, dearest."

"I daren't; I should be afraid of them falling to pieces."

"Don't be so absurd! Why not get some more?"

"My dear girl, do you know that I have very little between myself and the workhouse?"

"Oh, I know, you say nothing else. But cheer up, something is sure to turn up. I know it will; everything comes to him who waits."

"Everything except what he wants. However, it won't do any good to grouse."

After that, Michael put his foot down and refused to spend any more money. Cicely assured him that she did not want him to be extravagant on her account, but she wept when he would not take her out to tea, and considered that the world was very horrible, and that Michael was hatefully cruel.

At this time Michael made a practice of spending a short time at the Public Library nearest his rooms, where he could read the newspapers without having to pay for them. One morning as he was scanning the advertisement columns, hoping that he might find a person in want of an accompanist, or something equally unlikely, he saw several advertise-

ments for pianists to play at cinematograph entertainments. Applicants were given the option of writing or calling, and he did both. As soon as the letters were written he set out for the nearest theatre that had advertised. It was in Tottenham Court Road, and was called the "Protean Picturedrome." The versatility of the exhibits was symbolized by casts in bas-relief of three fleshy women lounging above the entrance, one of whom was smiling, the second weeping, and the third scowling. For a time Michael stood on the opposite side of the road looking at it, and realized that he had come too early. The entrance to the Picturedrome was closed with a shutter upon which were painted the words, "Continuous performance 3 till 11 P. M." It was only one o'clock, and he wondered what to do during the interval. He spent it in the British Museum, sitting on the seats, and only moving from one room to another when he felt that the keeper of the one he was in was beginning to eye him suspiciously.

When Michael returned to the Picturedrome, the shutter had disappeared, revealing a pay-box beside which was standing an enormous red-haired man in gaudy uniform. From time to time this personage gesticulated with a cane he carried, and announced in a loud voice the merits of the various films, which were additionally advertised by large and highly colored posters. Michael did not like having to accost this large man; he could imagine him laughing at him as soon as his back was turned, but it was the only thing to do. He found him more friendly and polite than he expected.

"The Manager, sir?" he answered, in reply to Michael's timid inquiry. "Yes, sir, he has just come in. I will take you to his office myself. Step this way, sir—might I ask your name?"

"Lawson—I have come to try and get a situation as pianist here."

The giant looked at Michael doubtfully. "You 'ardly looks the style we usually 'ave, if you will excuse my saying it, sir, but I'm sure I heartily 'opes you will be successful."

They found the manager, Mr. Potter, in his office, a small box near the projecting chamber. He was standing by the window cleaning his nails with a nib. He was certainly an American and probably a Jew, and he asked Michael a great many questions and made him display his ability as a pianist.

"Come right around into the the-atre," he said, having finished manicuring his finger-nails.

"But how about the audience?" asked Michael.

"That's all right; it's too early for any one to have come yet. Things don't wake up till four o'clock most days."

As Mr. Potter said, the theatre was empty, except for an attendant who was sitting smoking a cigarette in one of the seats. Directly he saw Mr. Potter he sprang up; and, extinguishing his cigarette, slung a basket of chocolates over his shoulders, and gave a few preliminary flashes from an electric torch he carried.

"Now, what can you play?" asked Mr. Potter, when they reached the piano.

"Anything you like—it depends what sort of stuff you want."

"Well, cut along—bright and tuney is the word here; something with a tang in it."

Michael rattled off a ragtime melody just then in vogue, and followed it by a few bars of a waltz.

"That's just so—now can you do much of it?"

"I can play anything I hear—whistle something and I will show you."

Mr. Potter responded with a windy version of a music-hall refrain; as he did so, Michael gazed fascinated at his fat lips which were bunched together like an unpleasant gathering. The melody was not very clear, but Michael managed to catch it, and rattled it off with a good real of dash.

He was amused to find how well he was able to imitate the cheap bravura effects that he had heard in such places. Mr. Potter, considerably impressed, was struck by an inspiration. After a little more questioning and playing, during which the attendant was called up as an auxiliary to whistle themes, Michael was engaged. The arrangement being that he was to play any tune whistled by a member of the audience. His salary was to be thirty-five shillings a week.

"Very good money too, but when I think I have struck a good thing I am generous," said Mr. Potter, rattling the money in his pockets as an earnest of his liberality. "You shan't suffer, young man. You can come next Monday, three-thirty."

When Michael left the piano, his place was taken by a weedy youth in spectacles, who had been sitting in the stalls. Michael had imagined him to be a member of the audience who were beginning to drop in, but he knew then that he was the pianist whose place he was to take. He turned round and looked at him, wondering how he felt, and thought Mr. Potter rather a brute to test applicants in his presence. Michael was, however, in no mood to mourn over other people's sorrows, being far too full of his own success. He paused to tell the big man at the entrance of his success, and then walked home rejoicing. The possible disadvantages of the situation he had obtained did not enter his head; he was prodigiously elated at the prospect of earning his living. "It isn't much," he said to himself, "but it is more than a lot of men make." His head was spinning with plans for the future; he would have the very devil of a good time.

### (III)

It was obvious that the first step to be taken was that of breaking from his old life. He announced the same evening that he was going to leave his rooms; not only because he

considered them too expensive, but because he realized that, if he was to stand any chance of happiness, he must enter his new station without reserves. He gave orders that all letters were to be returned through the Dead-letter Office, and then considered whom such a course would affect. Cicely first and foremost, but he was going to explain things to her. Had he been honest with himself, he would have admitted that, when he said he must break with his old life, he meant that he must escape Cicely. He was sorry to lose touch with Mrs. Innes and England, but they were both too closely associated with Cicely to be safe. He had not written to Mr. Chesters for four months, and as for Mrs. Lawson and Rosie he meant to let them know where he was when he had settled down. With the exception of one or two girls, he had been in the habit of corresponding with no one else. Although he had been so lonely, he was astonished to find how slender was the link that bound him to other people.

After sitting for some time lost in thought, Michael pulled himself together and prepared to write to Cicely. He had postponed doing so as long as possible, because it was the one thing he disliked. He had been anxious to part from her, but now that the time was come he hesitated, not quite knowing what he should say. He knew also that he was going to hurt her, and he hated hurting people. The fact was that Michael was very soft-hearted. If any one wished to make him do something, it was no use submitting the proposal as a business proposition favorable to Michael, it would not appeal to him. But play upon his pity, touch his heart, and he was won. He avoided looking at the beggars he passed in the street, because the sight of them made him want to give them money that he could not spare. If he found that one of his friends was suffering he was miserable. He pitied himself intensely.

He postponed the evil moment once more by filling a pipe

and waiting until it was well alight. Then he picked up his pen and wrote:

"DEAREST,

" You will wonder why I have been so long in writing to fix a day for our next meeting, but, as you know, I have always been afraid that circumstances would prove too strong for us, and I am dreadfully afraid that the time has come when we must say good-bye. I was hoping like a fool that my concert would make everything all right and that, when once I had obtained a hearing, I should have no difficulty in getting engagements. But, my dearest girl, people won't have me, and it is no good trying to disguise the fact that the concert was a failure, and that I am one, too. I have tried for a month to get a start but I can't, and as it is impossible to hold out any longer, we must simply throw up the whole thing. You know that I am not saying this because I don't love you as much as I did, although sometimes you have pretended you thought so; but I do, and I shall often think of you.

" I have at last succeeded in getting a job of sorts."

He paused, and a fearful joy stole over him: freedom was staring him in the face. When he resumed, he had the greatest difficulty in keeping up the lugubrious strain of his letter.

" It is very rotten and almost quite hopeless, but with care I hope to live upon it. I shall get thirty-five shillings a week, and my work will be unaristocratic. What is more, I am afraid there won't be much prospect of getting my salary raised, but the great thing is to keep going. I have been trying to spare you from knowing the worst as long as possible, Cicely, but I feel that it would not be fair to you to do so any longer, so this letter is to say good-bye. I should like to see you once more and give you another kiss, but it would only make things worse. I am leaving these rooms to-night, and I shan't leave any address, because I think that if you know you can't find me it will make it easier for you. I know you will be very sad, as I shall, but remember, dearest, that we are both young, so we shall probably forget sooner than now seems possible.

" Good-bye, ever your,

" MICHAEL."

By the time the letter was finished, Michael felt sad again; but his spirits rose as he proceeded to sort out his things, in order to decide what he should take with him. It was delightful to tear up papers, and stuff the waste-paper basket full of rubbish. He hesitated over the bundles of letters he had received from the girls he had known, all of which he had religiously preserved. He felt that it would only be fair to destroy Cicely's, but he wanted tremendously to keep them. They were almost the only tangible results he had won from life. As for Isobel's—they made a very thin packet, and he never for a moment thought of parting with them. But Cicely's — It was with a feeling of relief that he remembered there was no fire, and the evening far too close for him to be able to stand one.

## CHAPTER XIX

### STRICKLAND ENTERS

(I)

APPREHENSION is always worse than actuality, for people so easily adapt themselves to new circumstances. There come times in the life of every one when it seems that the future will be so greatly changed from the present that he who has to pass into it will of necessity become alien from himself, and lose all his old sympathies. Yet when the time arrives and the new conditions obtain, he looks back and finds that it is the old life that seems unreal. It is only in times of distress that the past becomes tangible; when all is well, the past is vague and it is the future that allures. The present is never able to be grasped; it is impossible to pause and say "*Now* life is fine." It is possibilities, not realities, that count.

After the first glow of expectancy cooled, Michael rather dreaded the uprooting that would remove him from all his old interests, but he soon settled down in his new surroundings. There were a great many advantages to compensate him for what he had lost. His hours of work were not short; but, as he never had to arrive at the Picturedrome before three in the afternoon, he seemed to have plenty of leisure. What was more important was the necessity of keeping to a regular time-table. He always needed a hand on the reins, for when they were relaxed he stumbled and was apt to take wrong turnings. The only thing he really disliked was the atmosphere in which his afternoons and evenings were spent. It was always close in the theatre, and towards the end of the evening, when the seats were full, the air grew heavy with tobacco smoke, so that when he

escaped from it he filled his lungs with the comparatively pure air in the streets with a feeling of relief.

Mr. Potter's "Good thing" did not come up to his expectations, although several times during the evening an attendant announced that "M. Francois Blanche, the famous pianist, who had been engaged exclusively by the Protean Picturedrome," would play by ear any tune whistled by a member of the audience. The young men and maidens, who munched chocolates while they sat holding each other's hands in the dark, were too bashful to take advantage of the opportunity. Nor was the result any better when accomplices were hired to act as decoys. Occasionally an irresponsible youth whistled a refrain so intimately associated with dubious deeds that it could not be repeated, but that was all, and the idea fell flat. It was followed by one that was far more successful. Several times during the performance, the bashful ones were invited to write on a slip of paper the names of tunes they would like to hear, and Michael played a selection of those chosen. This of course necessitated a good deal of hard work. Mr. Potter supplied stacks of music-hall and musical-comedy songs, valses, in fact all the tunes that were in vogue, and Michael had to learn them. Luckily it did not take him long; his gift of playing by ear stood him in good stead, and he found that, after running through a piece once or twice, he could remember the air, which was all he needed, as he added his own setting. The new scheme was a great success, and before long advertisements in the papers were added to the large poster which announced the practice at the doors. The seats were nearly always full, and Michael became a reliable judge of the popular taste in music. He found that the man in the street was seldom capable of assimilating more than half a dozen tunes at a time, so that those most in favor for the moment had to be played over and over again for weeks in succession.

In order that the ceremony might be rendered more impressive, the curtains that formerly had shielded the piano were removed, and the audience were duly impressed by the fact that Michael used no music. The girls who were there had the pleasure also of studying his profile, which they did to such good purpose that he began to receive a considerable number of letters praising his playing, or asking him to repeat a certain item, naively intimating that the writer would be present to hear it, and would be wearing a blue, or a green hat, as the case might be. After being disappointed by his inspection of a few of these girls, who usually were either plain or coarsely pretty, but never of the type he admired, Michael ceased to take much interest in the contents of his post-bag. The cinematograph-operator, with whom he became rather friendly, sometimes referred to the letters about which every one at the theatre got to know, but feeling that it would not be playing the game Michael never responded to his evident desire to see them.

Michael had taken rooms off the Hampstead Road, which were unpleasant but very cheap. It was when he was there that he felt least contented; for, away from the Picturedrome he knew no one at all, and his idle hours were a burden to him. In order to occupy the mornings, he tried his hand at writing short stories for the magazines, but after having them returned so often that he hated the sight of them, he gave up the attempt. Of course he felt sure that his stories were as good as a great many of those that appeared in print, but that was very little consolation. When he abandoned writing, the time seemed to pass even more slowly than it had previously, and he longed for a companion. He eyed the girls he passed on his way to and from the Picturedrome, but he seldom saw any whom he would have cared to know, and when he did they were unapproachable. He knew that there must be thousands of young men in a position similar to his own, and he wondered what they

did. He regretted that by his indolence he had allowed his old school friend Possum to drop out of his life. He hungered for humanity, but he knew that if he had the chance he would probably snub any one who made advances to him, as he had done so often before. As the weeks passed, the charm of novelty wore from his occupation, and he grew as morose as he had been when he was at Mrs. Hobby's. He became increasingly philosophical, and wondered whether life was after all any use.

## (II)

One Sunday evening at the Picturedrome, while Michael was sorting out the requests for the valse from *The Girl with the Green in her Eye*, and *The Cockchafer's Caper*, the then favorite melodies, he was astonished to find a request that he should play César Franck's *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*. He wondered who could have asked for it, and half hoped that some influential person had strayed in and been struck by his playing. Such things had often happened to other people. He played the piece fairly well; and the audience, who thought it dull but classical, applauded mildly. Some one who was sitting in one of the front rows got up. Michael saw the movement from the corner of his eye, and his heart leaped; he thought his moment had come. When he turned his head, he saw a tall young man with lank brown hair, standing at his side smiling.

"Excuse me, but can I have a word with you later on, when you are free?" asked the stranger.

"Certainly; at eleven," answered Michael, with the hap-hazard syntax of conversation.

The stranger nodded; and turning, quietly left the theatre.

Hammering away at the *Cockchafer's Caper*, Michael wondered what it meant, and decided reluctantly that he was

not likely to derive much benefit from such a patron. At the end of the performance the other was back in his seat. Michael shut the piano and extinguished the lights. Then he walked across and flung himself in the next seat.

"I'm quite at your service now," he said.

"What do you say to getting out of this? It's a bit frowsty in here."

"Rather! I know, it used to give me the pip till I got used to it," said Michael, stretching himself luxuriantly as they left the Picturedrome.

"I dare say you will think me a bit cracked," said his companion, "but, when I heard you play, I was certain that you had been with Busaco."

"I was," answered Michael, rather astonished. "How the deuce did you know?"

"I was with him, too, once upon a time—my name is Strickland—there's no mistaking that three-finger dodge of his."

They wandered off into technicalities, and it was some time before Strickland remembered to explain more fully why he had introduced himself.

"You see," he said, "I saw that neither of us had come down right side up—you don't mind my saying so?—and I guessed that we both must have had very much the same experience. It was such a devil of a time since I had spoken to any one who knew anything about music, that I couldn't resist the temptation."

"I'm very glad you didn't," replied Michael; "for, to tell you the truth, I know scarcely a soul in town, and I have been getting rather fed up with my own company."

They walked on talking, finely regardless of the hour, and each was absurdly delighted to find they had this or that taste in common. At length they pulled up at Hyde Park Corner at one o'clock in the morning, and realized with astonishment how the time had fled.

"Good Lord! it is after one o'clock!" ejaculated Strickland, peering at his watch.

"I have got to get back to the Hampstead Road," said Michael, mournfully.

"Camberwell for me—no buses now; they stop early on Sundays."

"Confound it! I can't say I feel very keen on starting for a walking tour at this time of day—what do you say to a taxi?"

"Not for me, thanks," replied the more cautious Strickland. "I don't know about you, but I'm by no means a millionaire."

"Well, nor am I—I suppose there is no choice. At any rate we can go part of the way in company."

Before parting, they exchanged addresses and made arrangements for a future meeting. It is difficult to know which was most pleased with the evening's adventure. Neither of them was unusually sentimental—at any rate, outwardly; but, on their way home, each decided that the other was just the companion for whom he had been waiting. As for Michael, he felt as if he had escaped from darkness into sudden sunlight. "Thank God, I know some one—good egg!" he said to himself, and, notwithstanding his weary limbs, his heart urged him to a brisk pace.

He awoke next morning with a vague consciousness that the day held something pleasant, and as he lay half awake he wondered what it could be. When he remembered, it made him skip out of bed and go down to breakfast with an appetite. But, while rejoicing at the prospect of becoming friendly with Strickland, the morning had revived his usual doubts. "I dare say he will be a bounder," he murmured, "who isn't!"

### (III)

Basil Strickland, having reached the age of twenty-three without winning any success, still possessed a reserved, but

obstinate conviction that he was a genius. At the age of eight he had horrified his father by appearing at a concert as an infant prodigy. The only result of this appearance, which took place late in the season, was a controversy in the newspapers as to whether his pastors and masters were justified in removing him from the nursery in order to appear on the concert platform. The discussion was heated, and obtained such prominence that a great many people began to think it had been engineered by Basil's impresario for advertisement. Unluckily for the object of the argument, a peculiarly horrible murder was committed just as he might have obtained some benefit from the publicity given to his name. A second concert fell flat; and Colonel Strickland, firmly refusing to allow his son to accept an offer to tour in the provinces, sent him off to school, where he hoped that association with other boys would drive away musical nonsense from his head.

When Basil reached the age of seventeen, Colonel Strickland died, leaving his widow in straightened circumstances, and his son well on his way through Sandhurst. A chance visit to London, where Basil went to a concert given by an extremely popular pianist, awoke the maggot in his brain; and, despite his mother's tearful protests, he threw up his place at Sandhurst in order to devote himself once more to music. He discovered that he possessed a certain amount of creative faculty, and determined to become a composer. At that time, the "Modernists" were a great deal to the fore; and, in order to be enlisted in their ranks, he resolutely strangled his inclinations towards melody, and devoted many hours to constructing strange progressions. He wrote a symphony, several tone-poems, and a large number of choral works without hearing any of them performed. This was largely due to the fact that Mrs. Strickland numbered among her friends none who possessed influence in musical circles. In time, Basil's optimism yielded to force of circumstance,

and he was obliged to seek some other way of earning his living. Eventually, he obtained a position as conductor of the orchestra at a suburban music-hall, where, as a penance for his sins, he was compelled to sit through two performances a night, listening to the compositions of American Jews.

Basil lived with his mother in a small house in Camberwell, not far from the scene of his work, and there he spent his odd moments adding to the pile of unaccepted manuscripts that he kept in a wooden box in his room. His former confidence had evaporated, leaving in its place a dogged conviction of his worth; a belief which his mother shared. Mrs. Strickland had no taste for music, and the click of her knitting needles was apt to irritate her son when he was playing the piano, but on the whole they got on astonishingly well together. She was a comfortable woman with little red veins in her cheeks and dazzlingly white hair. Her bedroom-slipper view of life acted as a corrective to Basil's rather mercurial temperament, and it was largely due to her that he had succeeded in keeping his situation for two years. She was easy-going, but secretly he was rather afraid of her. In her rambling, inconsequent conversation she betrayed a wide knowledge of life.

A fortnight after the incident at the Picturedrome, Michael was submitted for Mrs. Strickland's approval. She liked his quiet bearing, and well-bred manners, but he would have been rather disconcerted had he known that, as she sat smiling at him through her large round spectacles, she was saying to herself, "Poor lamb, what a state his socks are in!" After dinner, Michael was initiated into the mysteries of whist, the practice of which Mrs. Strickland cherished, as it reminded her of happier days when bridge had not been invented.

"It is quite a comfort to sit down, even with a dummy," she said. "We so seldom get a game now, except when

Mr. Leite comes, and even then Basil is usually out. I remember when your father and I were in the Hills, my dear, we used to play every evening with a Major Sarsons and his wife. He got into Queer Street afterwards, poor man; he used to drink dreadfully, and no one can stand much in that way in India."

When the cards had been dealt, Mrs. Strickland pursed her lips in comical concentration.

"Now we must attend to business. You two boys will want to chatter, I dare say, but you must put up with an old woman for once. It is dreadfully wicked to talk while playing, you know."

She was half amused and half vexed when her cards were bad.

"You are a very undutiful son to give your mother such cards!" she protested to Basil. "I am sure Mr. Lawson will be more polite—but I am not going to call him anything more than Michael in future, as we are going to be great friends."

At half-past nine a bowl of bread-and-milk was brought in for Mrs. Strickland.

"I am rather faddy, you know," she said to Michael, apologetically, "but I am old-fashioned faddy. I don't eat nuts and wear Jaeger; I drink hot milk to make me sleep in winter, and in summer I eat lettuces," ("like a rabbit," interposed Basil). "It is all very well to smile, but when one gets old it is a sad thing to lie awake at night. One sees so many grievous things during life, that it doesn't do to think about it at all. I remember your great-uncle Fewson telling me, Basil, when I was a little girl, that, if ever he could not sleep, he would jump up and saddle his horse and go for a gallop. We were staying at Kemacott at the time, and I remember how I used to try and keep awake in the hope that I should hear him go galloping down the drive."

She asked Michael about his life, and whether he did not

feel lonely at times. His dislike of appearing sentimental made him laugh the matter off. But the old lady saw through his deception.

"Whether you are lonely, or not," she said, "I hope you will come and see us. Even if Basil isn't in, I am always glad of a gossip, and you must come whenever you can. Please don't think that because the invitation is general it does not exist. We really do want you to come, don't we, Basil?"

"Of course, mother—he will come, never fear."

The contented life of mother and son in their little house gave Michael much food for thought. He contrasted Strickland's position with his own, and thought of his own mother. When he considered it, he found that he had grown to regard her almost as a stranger; they had never been attached, and it had always been Rosie with whom he associated the thought of home. He wondered whether he was unnatural, or whether in reality most people cared as little as he did. His mother:—he could not recall the tones of her voice; he was even uncertain as to her features; he only remembered how irritated he used to be by her ways. She had always seemed rather dense. Now he thought how nice it would be to go home to just such another little house as the one he had left, to find Rosie and his mother awaiting him. He determined that he would write at once to say how he was getting on, and perhaps before long he would be able to broach the idea of their coming to London. But he must not do so too soon, or it would merely accentuate his previous remissness.

## CHAPTER XX

### FORTUNE SMILES

(I)

THE accepted maxim that a decision should be slept upon is fatal to good resolutions; they are invariably overlain. There is only one certain way of fulfilling a kindly impulse, and that is by carrying it out on the spot. There is a false conscience that takes the part of Devil's advocate if any delay is made, and no Court of Law hears arguments so subtle and insinuating as those which Conscience can produce when the welfare of its owner is affected.

When Michael reached home after spending the evening with the Stricklands, it was too late to write to his mother, and he postponed doing so till the next day. Consequently, he never wrote. Letter-writing is an acquired habit, and one that is very easily lost; Michael, always a bad correspondent, had through disuse almost lost the power of writing letters unless compelled to do so. He dreaded it. As the days passed he began to think that, after all, perhaps it was just as well he had not written to his mother. Why should he be the first to renew the correspondence? Had the others really wished to keep in touch with him they never would have ceased to write. By degrees he began to believe that he had been ill-used; and, as soon as the notion entered his head, all hope of his carrying the resolution into effect was at an end. This long chain of arguments had arisen in the first place simply because he had been too lazy to act at once.

The winter passed, and at Christmas Michael dined the Stricklands, where he met Mr. Leite, a queer ~~un~~ aged man with a doubtful reputation, who could make himself charming when he liked, as he always did when he was with Mrs. Strickland, for whom he had a sincere regard. Christmas seemed scarcely over before spring swept through the town, drying the roads, and swirling clouds of dust abode on the streets. But blue skies and sunlight made little difference in the Picturedrome; of far greater importance was the fact that Michael's power of attraction was beginning to increase. There is no philanderer to equal the London public; no sooner is the old love's freshness faded than, ~~hey!~~ for a new love. Almost daily, new picture-palaces were ~~being~~ opened, the result being that the Protean was losing some of its popularity. There was little danger of Michael losing his situation, but it was useless for him to hope that his salary would be increased. The astonishing thing was that the craze for frequenting cinematograph entertainments showed no signs of diminishing, perhaps because they formed convenient places in which to pass an odd hour, and where loving couples could sit secluded in the kindly dark.

It was not until they had known each other for nearly months that Michael was able to see the conditions in which Strickland worked. But at length, he found a ~~time~~ to take his place one evening, and he spent the evening in the orchestra at the foot of Strickland's ~~stage~~. Constantly engaged in the evening as he was, Michael had not been to a theatre or music-hall for more than a year, and he felt like a boy released from school. He was as at the easy way in which Strickland took things; he did listlessly conducting, while he chatted to Michael those of the orchestra who were within hearing, only when the star performers appeared that he pulled himself together, for then it required the greatest vigilance to keep the orchestra in line with the singer's irreverent

Isobel, giving him a friendly

turn, turned him, and pushed it

"like me a scrap?"

"It's a funny old thing!"

her nose into his shoulder

"I've been a bad boy," he cried fervently.  
"I've never been a bad boy before. I have been

"I shall put a puppy-collar  
ring," said Michael shaking his head. "You won't escape again."

in a humble voice. "Now  
comes down."

Michael felt that nothing  
had been done. "I've been a bad boy," he announced.  
"I've never been a bad boy before. I have been a bad boy!" Isobel protested.  
"I will walk home, and suck  
your milk, and fleece you. What a cat

"I won't pay all the same."

"I won't pay all the same," she said, "I won't pay all the same!" She stamped

her foot and tried to thrust a half-penny into Michael's hand.

"I'll pay a hundred and twenty  
pence a day, without a stamp every day."

Michael's mind to wander to

the garden, where he has such a red neck,

The winter passed, and at Christmas Michael dined with the Stricklands, where he met Mr. Leite, a queer middle-aged man with a doubtful reputation, who could make himself charming when he liked, as he always did when he was with Mrs. Strickland, for whom he had a sincere regard. Christmas seemed scarcely over before spring swept through the town, drying the roads, and swirling clouds of dust about the streets. But blue skies and sunlight made little difference in the Picturedrome; of far greater importance was the fact that Michael's power of attraction was beginning to decrease. There is no philanderer to equal the London public; no sooner is the old love's freshness faded than, hey! for a new love. Almost daily, new picture-palaces were being opened, the result being that the Protean was losing some of its popularity. There was little danger of Michael losing his situation, but it was useless for him to hope that his salary would be increased. The astonishing thing was that the craze for frequenting cinematograph entertainments showed no signs of diminishing, perhaps because they formed convenient places in which to pass an odd hour, and where loving couples could sit secluded in the kindly dark.

It was not until they had known each other for nearly six months that Michael was able to see the conditions under which Strickland worked. But at length, he found a substitute to take his place one evening, and he spent the time sitting in the orchestra at the foot of Strickland's rostrum. Constantly engaged in the evening as he was, Michael had not been to a theatre or music-hall for more than a year, and he felt like a boy released from school. He was astonished at the easy way in which Strickland took things; sitting as he did listlessly conducting, while he chatted to Michael or those of the orchestra who were within hearing. It was only when the star performers appeared that he pulled himself together, for then it required the greatest vigilance to keep the orchestra in line with the singer's irregular time.

After his long isolation from such entertainments, the vulgarity of the performance came rather as a shock to Michael; it was all so shoddy. There was only one Star, the other items being contributed by very inferior performers. An elderly damsel, whose hair was arranged in three solid wedges, and who was wearing a white dress and long black gloves, sang a comic song, and with arch nods invited the audience to join in the refrain. Between the verses she minced up and down the stage twitching the hem of her short ballet-skirt, or made motions from her bosom with her hands, as if she was slowly swimming. An immensely fat Jewess sang in a sepulchral contralto voice to the accompaniment of a dwarf at a piano and a care-worn man with a flute. The occupants of the seats, which ranged in price from twopence to eighteenpence, were not chary of their criticisms; but an uncomfortable-looking naval officer, who sang a patriotic song, supported by two boy-scouts, roused them to paroxysms of loyalty.

Michael was nauseated by the performance. It was always the same: the mass of the people had in them a vein of almost childish sentiment, and this was traded upon in order to fleece them. Every year the newspapers pandered more and more to the depraved side of the populace. He felt that the old interest in murders as exhibitions of brutality was better than the sentimental rubbish that, in taking its place, exalted the criminal into an unlucky hero.

#### (II)

As they were walking home after the performance, Strickland announced that he had just completed another composition. Unlike his wont, he was inclined to deprecate it.

"I am afraid it's not up to much, but it's rather tuney, and I think it might turn out a successful pot-boiler. Still I don't care much for lowering the standard of my work, as I think it would ——"

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After his long isolation from such entertainments, the vulgarity of the performance came rather as a shock to Michael; it was all so shoddy. There was only one Star, the other items being contributed by very inferior performers. An elderly damsel, whose hair was arranged in three solid wedges, and who was wearing a white dress and long black gloves, sang a comic song, and with arch nods invited the audience to join in the refrain. Between the verses she minced up and down the stage twitching the hem of her short ballet-skirt, or made motions from her bosom with her hands, as if she was slowly swimming. An immensely fat Jewess sang in a sepulchral contralto voice to the accompaniment of a dwarf at a piano and a care-worn man with a flute. The occupants of the seats, which ranged in price from twopence to eighteenpence, were not chary of their criticisms; but an uncomfortable-looking naval officer, who sang a patriotic song, supported by two boy-scouts, roused them to paroxysms of loyalty.

Michael was nauseated by the performance. It was always the same: the mass of the people had in them a vein of almost childish sentiment, and this was traded upon in order to fleece them. Every year the newspapers pandered more and more to the depraved side of the populace. He felt that the old interest in murders as exhibitions of brutality was better than the sentimental rubbish that, in taking its place, exalted the criminal into an unlucky hero.

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"Don't be such an owl," exclaimed Michael; "there is no earthly reason why a thing shouldn't be good as well as popular. What is it called?"

"I thought of calling it *Down Countryside*; it's a sort of suite in four little movements. I have never been into the country much, but I tried to write down what I felt like when I thought about it."

"Robins, and milkmaids, and buttercups, and hay?"

"That's it. Let's-get-out-of-this-damned-hole-and-jump-about sort of idea."

"It sounds rather decent. Who are you going to send it to?"

"I don't know if I shall do anything, but I thought of the Proms., though it hardly seems worth it. Besides, every one has such a prejudice against my name now."

"Suppose I come round one morning, so that we can go through the score?" suggested Michael, and the other willingly agreed.

When the meeting took place, Michael's arguments prevailed and the score went off to take its chance in the world. For over a month no news was heard of it, and it had almost passed out of Michael's mind when he received a post-card from Strickland.

"Accepted. Who'd 'a' thought it? Come to-night."

The time that elapsed before rehearsals of the suite were begun hung heavily on the hands of both the friends. There were tremendous discussions in the little sitting-room, while Mrs. Strickland sat by the window knitting as calmly as if nothing had occurred to set the world by the ears. Her son, however, was quite overcome by his sudden access to fortune; he could not help feeling that something would rob him of his chance. Michael was almost as elated as if he had written the suite himself. Strickland obtained him a pass for a rehearsal, and he was delighted at the fascination of the composition, and negatived his friend's forebodings.

"Look here," he said. "I bet you ten to one in quids that it is a success. It's all right; neither of us can afford it."

"Done!" returned Strickland, feeling that he was bribing Providence.

"I don't suppose it will do much for you by itself," said Michael, pondering, "but don't you see that if this goes off all right, you will get your other things taken?"

"Of course I do, my dear chap. I wish I didn't see it quite so clearly, because—oh, dash it all, it's sure to be a frost."

"Rot, you will be a howling Crœsus soon."

"Suppose we talk of something else, or I shall dream wonderful dreams."

It must be recorded to Michael's credit that at this time he felt no envy of his friend, although his own circumstances were not such as would allow him to scoff at the prosperity of others. Life in London on ninety pounds a year is a very real fact for a man of gentle birth and comfortable upbringing. Always he had to curb the slightest tendency to extravagance, newspapers, tobacco, and every little luxury had carefully to be regulated. Had it not been for his piano, it is true that he would have been able to live more comfortably; but he could not bring himself to part with it, although the cost of hiring it formed a considerable item in his weekly expenditure. It might be thought that he had enough playing at the Picturedrome, but he did not consider what he played there to be music; as he once told Strickland, it was merely turning the handle of a sausage-machine. He believed in Strickland's talent, and his only feeling was one of delight that at length it had been recognized. He was deeply impressed by the suite, and, carried away, he expressed a confidence in its success that he afterwards regretted. Virtue was so seldom rewarded in this world.

## (III)

On the evening of the concert, Michael insisted on standing in the promenade in order that he might hear the comments of the audience. Strickland left him at the door; and, as he stood leaning upon his stick, Michael felt painfully agitated. His heart thumped, and his legs were unsteady; he had taken the affair tremendously to heart, and felt as if the fate of kingdoms was hanging in the balance. The suite was well placed, half-way through the program, and Michael read the brief analytical notes half a dozen times while waiting for the concert to begin. Never before had he recognized the full significance of the words, "First time of performance."

The earlier items seemed endless. A soprano twirled and trilled through an *Aria*, and Michael winced at the storm of applause that greeted it; he wanted the audience to reserve their enthusiasm. At last the conductor raised his wand to commence the suite. Michael heard scarcely a note of it; his head was throbbing. He caught sight of Mrs. Strickland in the grand circle, and envied her calmness. He looked about him, as if he could discover what people thought of the composition, and he saw that one or two men near him were nodding their heads to its lilt. When it came to a finish there was silence. Would it never end? He burst into perspiration, and with a sensation of giddiness heard thunders in his ears. When once the applause started there was no doubt about it; it was deafening. Some one in the balcony cried "Encore," and the word was taken up all over the house. As in a dream, Michael saw his friend, flushed and youthful, upon the platform. Once, twice, how many times did he come? Abruptly there was silence, and the notes of the first movement were heard again. It was almost incredible; seldom, if ever, were encores allowed at the concerts.

When the suite ended, Michael wanted to say to every

one, "I know the composer—I know him—he's a friend of mine." But he managed to restrain himself, and dashed off to the artists' door. After some delay he reached Strickland. When he saw him, he could do nothing except wring his hand, for there was such a lump in his throat. It was Strickland who relieved the tension.

"You've won your bet, old chap," he said, laughing.

Then Michael had to yield his place to the crowd of musical people who wished to congratulate the young composer.

The incredible happened. Success had at last singled out Strickland to lavish upon him her favors. The suite was performed everywhere; hardly a week passed without it appearing in a program. It was repeated, "by general desire," several times at the Promenade Concerts; and, a little later, it found its way into the program of the Sunday concerts. The critics unbent, and were generous in their praise of Strickland, whom they hailed as the Hope of English Music. *The Morning Wire* devoted a column to a discussion of Strickland's earlier works, in which unmistakable signs of genius were found. Far more satisfactory than the *succès d'estime* was the popularity of the composition, the sheer tunefulness of which won its way into the hearts of all hearers. The most austere members of the Philharmonic Society had difficulty in escaping its lure. Strickland was soon able to open a banking account for the first time in his life. It is an open question whether he enjoyed most the praise that was lavished upon him, or drawing the first checks in his new check-book.

## CHAPTER XXI

### ISOBEL INTRUDES

(I)

AGAINST his wishes, even against his opposition, Strickland found himself carried from his old position and swept into a new life. The world conspired to make him false to his ideals, and, forced as he was to mix with a new sphere of acquaintances, he found that, so far as his former friends were concerned, regretfulness soon was followed by forgetfulness. It all happened so quickly that, after the night when his suite was performed for the first time, he had scarcely any recollection of his doings until he found himself established as a success, and passing from one house to another, everywhere among people who, until quite recently, had been unknown to him. He was wise enough to place his work in the hands of a well-known agent, and openings speedily were found for all those of his accumulated compositions that he considered worth preserving. Among others, Michael slipped from his mind, and he would have forgotten him completely had not Mrs. Strickland reminded him of Michael's existence, and suggested that he should be asked to spend an evening with them again. Strickland was quite ready to invite him, but the difficulty was to find a Sunday evening when he himself would be at liberty. Night after night he had one or more engagements, and when he found a free evening it was always on a week-day, when Michael could not get away. Imperceptibly Michael slipped from Strickland's mind; a postponement was followed by a change of plans, and in a short time he was forgotten.

Michael himself felt neither astonished nor offended at the trend of events. From the first he realized that Strickland's success would in all probability terminate their inti-

macy. He regarded such a result as inevitable; nevertheless, he was very sorry to lose his friend. He did not blame Strickland, rather he cried out against the fate that doomed him to lose, one after the other, every companion. It seemed a strange thing that, while when an opportunity offered he had no difficulty in making friends, he could never keep them for long. Each in turn drifted away, and seemed to become prosperous. It was only he who made no headway. He confessed to himself that in the majority of cases his own laziness had been the cause of the breach, but for that very reason it seemed more of a hardship in the present instance, when he was not to blame. It would have been easy for him to go over and see what had happened when no news of Strickland came. But Michael, who was always apt to err on the side of over-sensitiveness, disliked the possibility of forcing himself where he was not wanted. When at length a tardy invitation to supper came he refused it, acting upon hypercritical scruples. He told himself that what had been delayed so long was sent eventually merely from a sense of duty, and that it would be undignified to accept it too readily.

At this time the habit of introspection was growing upon Michael, but, never having trained himself to think consecutively, he found it difficult to follow a chain of thought for long without allowing his mind to wander to other subjects. All the same, in spasmodic jerks and flashes, he was trying to estimate his true position. He had spent in isolation the period of life when mind and body, rapidly maturing, need some outlet for their superfluous energy. There was in him more than a trace of the much derided artistic temperament, which made him unnecessarily pessimistic. Even without it, he would have succeeded in being miserable. Literally, he ached for an object upon which to lavish his affection; when he found none he became morbid and irritable. Yet he was not without flashes of a sane and wholesome humor,

and at times he would say to himself with a smile, "The question is whether it is really life that is wrong, or my liver;" a cheap wit, but sufficient for the purpose. He always found it so much easier to appreciate or criticize the work of others than to create for himself; mentally he was inarticulate. Musing much about the object of existence, he decided that life was a very sorry affair; working, eating, and sleeping filled the days. How those who were handicapped physically could summon sufficient courage to go on living he could not comprehend. He once said to Strickland, "If I was dumb or blind, I should throw up the sponge, and tie a bootlace round my neck, and ask them to drown me with the next lot of kittens;" and he really believed that he would. He had no definite religion to fall back upon, and, as he could not conceive the possibility of a future life, he seemed to be fighting for air in a trap. At the back of his mind, however, there lurked the conviction that there was a solution to his difficulties, if he could only find it. Life could not be purposeless. At times he longed to escape from London, and wondered whether, once in the open fields, he would be happy and quiet-hearted.

#### (II)

The Picturedrome had become a habit, and Michael often found himself sitting at the piano without any clear idea how he had come there, or what had taken place during the morning. The orchestra had been augmented by the addition of a harmonium, which Michael had to play while films of an historical nature were being exhibited, and by a drum, sandpaper, and other devices by means of which Mr. Potter considered that realistic effects might be produced. These latter were presided over by a small boy, whom Michael regarded with no friendly eye. The silly noises irritated him; but his protests were unavailing, and he had to put up with them to the detriment of his temper.

Unknowingly, through the uneventful days that followed his estrangement from Strickland, Michael was approaching a crisis: they were the lull before a storm that was not reached until late in July. It came on an intensely hot day when, although only partly filled, the theatre was almost unendurably stuffy. Michael had been counting the hours that would elapse before he was relieved, with the impatience of a convict calculating the date upon which his sentence expired. When the lights were raised during the interval between two films, he turned casually to glance at the audience, and found himself looking into the critical eyes of Isobel Hargrieves. She had evidently seen him first, and was making her way towards the piano through the rows of seats. For a moment Michael's heart seemed to stop, then with a thump it began to beat feverishly.

"Michael!" exclaimed Isobel when she reached him. "What in the world do you think you are doing?"

"I am playing for my bread-and-butter," he replied, instinctively dropping into the bantering tone they used formerly.

"Come and have tea."

"How can I? What's more, you mustn't speak to the man at the wheel, or he will get the sack."

The lights were extinguished just then; and automatically Michael began to play. He realized how little time he had to waste.

"Isobel—I can't come now, but how about to-morrow? Not in the afternoon, as I have to come here then, but can you come somewhere in the morning?"

"Early rising is against my principles, my dear, but for once I will get up, if you are good."

"Where will you be?"

"If you are at South Kensington Tube at eleven, I will try and come."

"Promise?"

"P'raps," said Isobel, smiling. She would not leave without a parting shot, however; and, leaning across the rail, she added in a clear voice, "I really believe you are bonier than ever, my dear!"

"Do go away!" retorted Michael, who felt uneasy. As soon as she went, he felt desolate. Why had she come again just as he was forgetting her? Already his old wounds were opening, and he seemed to be as much in love with her again as ever. He tried to distinguish her face in the uncertain reflection from the screen, but he could not do so; and, when the light was switched on again, he found that she had left the theatre.

That night the curse of Adam was upon Michael, and he was tossed from bliss to despair. He pictured a dozen scenes; Isobel yielding and repentant, and himself too thankful to feel magnanimous; Isobel imperious, and Michael beseeching; worst of all Isobel mocking. Let him but know one way or the other what his fate was to be. He felt that he would prefer to be exiled from her forever, rather than that she should play with him and conceal her true feelings. While he lay awake in bed with fiery brain, he was a match even for Isobel mocking; in a dozen imaginary conversations he was ready with the riposte to her thrusts. To-morrow ——!

### (III)

They went to the National Portrait Gallery. In the Tube Isobel explained how she came to be in the Picturedrome the previous afternoon. She had been to Maples, and on the way back had been attracted by the confident poster announcing the merits of M. Francois Blanche that before now had made Michael blush with a feeling of outraged self-respect. She had entered expecting a ludicrously bad performance, to find "You, of all silly people."

Isobel was beautifully dressed, and Michael as he walked

beside her felt intensely proud of her, and contrasted his feeling with the sense of shame that had made him avoid conspicuous places when, on other occasions, he had been with less desirable companions; although the thought of his despicable behavior at such times made him blush. Now he peacocked it, conscious of the rightness of Isobel, from her shiny shoes and silk stockings, to the hat that suited so well her face with its broad oval curving at the chin. He thanked Providence that his clothes were almost new; indeed, he had started early in order to buy a new straw hat and gloves.

At the Portrait Gallery it was a students' day, and the place was nearly empty, for the severe ladies who sit on little camp-stools find the neighboring National Gallery a more profitable field of operations. For a time, the two intruders stood talking, first in one room and then in another. Both felt slightly uneasy. Impatient of the seemingly purposeless loitering, Michael at length lured Isobel into one of the alcoves between the screens of pictures, hoping that he might be allowed to kiss her and win an assurance that she was still fond of him. He led her into more than one such alcove, but each time his courage failed him. Isobel would not betray her feelings a jot, and he was terribly afraid that any advance on his part would be rewarded by a snub. He was forced to talk in a foolish way about the pictures; and Isobel, who was enjoying herself thoroughly, simulated great interest, and finding that he knew very little about the subject, plied him with questions as to technical points.

"Suppose we sit down for a bit?" she suggested at length when they were in a room at the end of the gallery.

Michael fetched two chairs, and placed them carefully where they would be least conspicuous. Isobel fanned herself with her unopened catalogue, and eyed the pictures opposite her.

"What nice legs Philip the Second had," she observed.

"There used to be a man in the Opera in Dresden who had lovely legs. I used to go to see them, and when he was in red silk tights they were a dream. We once had a play at school, and I was chosen to be the page because I had such nice legs. I liked it awfully, and went kicking them about all over the place. Don't you wish yours were not so like little wire pipe-cleaners?"

Had it been any one else, Michael probably would have considered it unpleasantly hoydenish: as it was, he thought it charming, and tried to follow Isobel's lead.

"We might offer ourselves as advertisements of eating and not-eating some food," he said.

Isobel poked out a foot, and drew up her skirt.

"My stockings are rather nice, don't you think?"

"Yes, especially the little ornament there," said Michael, indicating it with awed finger.

"That's not an ornament, it's a darn! How ridik'lus you are." Isobel became weak with gurgling laughter.

They were not to enjoy their seclusion for long. A policeman peered round the door; and then, with placid consciousness that he was not wanted, creaked noisily round the room, finally to take up his stand just inside the door where he could see them. Isobel stared at him impudently.

"Some people want smacking, don't you think so, Bony?" she said loudly. "Come on, we aren't pictures, so we needn't stay."

Realizing that the time was short, Michael grew desperate. "She can't kill me," he said to himself, and contrived once more to lead his companion into a quiet corner. It was a moment before he had the courage to speak. Then he put his arms out.

"Isobel!" he pleaded, his voice sounding forced. She came to him with a sudden smile.

"You are still quite a little poppet, aren't you!" he said exultantly.

"Little, but fat," commented Isobel, giving him a friendly hug.

"Don't swallow my veil," she warned him, and pushed it up. "Now—once; not more!"

"My dear old lady, do you still like me a scrap?"

"Just a leetle, Bony—oh, you are a funny old thing!"

She laughed deliciously, pushing her nose into his shoulder.

"I never forgot you for a moment," he cried fervently.

"How dreadfully dull you must have been. I have been having the time of my life."

"Now I have caught you again I shall put a puppy-collar on you, and lead you about on a string," said Michael shaking her. "I'm not going to let you escape again."

"Aren't you?" she asked in an humble voice. "Now you must let me go before my hair comes down."

With Isobel in her present mood, Michael felt that nothing mattered; and, having made a rapid mental calculation, he hailed a taxi. "I shall see you safely home," he announced.

"How dare you be so extravagant!" Isobel protested. "I shall pay for it. I suppose you will walk home, and suck a candle for supper after I have fleeced you. What a cat I am!"

"I won't dispute it, but you shan't pay all the same."

"Now, Bony, be good—do you hear, sir!" She stamped her foot on the floor of the cab, and tried to thrust a half-crown into Michael's pocket.

"If you give me that, I shall buy a hundred and twenty farthing-buns, and send you one without a stamp every day."

"Please!"

"No!"

Isobel gave it up; and allowed her mind to wander to other matters.

"I think our driver is a nice man; he has such a red neck,

that you can see he wouldn't look round, so if you are good you may sit a little nearer."

"You are an outrageous flirt, Miss Hargrieves."

"I do like being a flirt, Bony," said Isobel, slipping a small hand into his.

As it happened, Michael did walk home as Isobel laughingly had prophesied. It was not that he had no money, but he wanted to save all he had, so that he could spend it when he was with her.

He was not to see Isobel again till the following Sunday, when they had arranged to spend the day at Richmond. Isobel had suggested it, and he had agreed unhesitatingly, although he knew that it would be very difficult for him to get away from the theatre. To ask leave of absence would have been useless. His relations with Mr. Potter had been growing gradually more strained as the attendance at the Picturedrome decreased. Michael had once suggested that, if his playing was the principal attraction to the public, his salary ought at least to be equal to the amount expended in hiring films. The proposal had not been taken well, and Michael was still earning the same amount as when first he was engaged.

Michael breathed more freely when he had arranged for a substitute to take his place on Sunday. He had adopted this means of securing a free day on former occasions when he had been to see Strickland, and had never been detected by Mr. Potter. He spent much time during the remainder of the week in uttering fervent prayers for fine weather, and got up early in order to run down to the Public Library where he could study the forecast. Isobel was staying in Kensington, and on more than one occasion he spent the morning walking over there, but he never succeeded in catching sight of her.

## CHAPTER XXII

### TONIC AND PHYSIC

#### (I)

ON Sunday morning, Michael awoke at five o'clock with terror at his heart. He leaped from his bed, and leaned from the window. It was a splendid morning; and, although he was too much afraid of disappointment to be optimistic, he felt instinctively that the promise of a perfect day would be fulfilled. The sun shone palely in an immensely distant sky, but on the ground and along the narrow street there was a faint haze that obscured the outlines of the houses. Already a woman was busy with a broom at the door of a house not far along the street, and the noise she made was intensified by contrast with the utter stillness elsewhere. During the night London had been garnished by dew and cool air; and, leaning from the window, Michael drew in the freshness in great gulps. He went back to bed but not to sleep. He had not arranged to meet Isobel until eleven o'clock, but before eight he was shaving himself for the second time. He dressed with meticulous care, peering doubtfully at his suits to discover which was the least shabby, and giving his boots an extra polish with a pair of socks. When at length he surveyed the result in the looking glass, he decided that it was not so bad.

The expedition opened well by Isobel arriving at Waterloo punctually. She was astonished by her achievement, and kept Michael listening to her self-congratulations so long

that, when at length he was able to buy the tickets, they had by no means too much time in which to catch the train. They secured an empty first-class compartment, and sat demurely on opposite sides of the carriage next to the windows. There were not many people traveling by the train; but, when once or twice some one approached the door, Isobel had her own methods of driving them off. She drummed on the windows as if to attract their attention; and then, notwithstanding Michael's agonized protests made horrible grimaces at them. When once the train started they were safe from interruptions for nearly half an hour, as it did not stop at any station until it reached Richmond. Isobel leaned back comfortably against the cushions, and stretched out her feet with luxurious ease. Michael lit his pipe and then looked at her.

"You don't mind this?" Michael said, indicating his pipe, as he made a second attempt to light it. "I hardly ever smoke cigarettes. 'P. was a peep, comfy and cheap,' as the poet has it. He was a north-country poet."

"It's the heat," mused Isobel. "Perhaps a little air would do him good. Waiter! kindly lower the window."

"Certainly, madam," responded Michael; "but, if you sit there, I fear a beam will enter your large eye, so I suggest your sitting on this side."

"Carried unanimously," said Isobel, jumping up.

"And now, suppose you give me a kiss," suggested Michael, slipping his arm across her shoulders.

They decided to have lunch as soon as they arrived, in order that they might have the rest of the day free. For some time they wandered about the town looking for a suitable place for luncheon. Michael, who seldom had been to Richmond, did not know of anywhere, and wondered whether Isobel would expect to be taken to a hotel. He did not wish to go to one—there were the questions of wines

and suitable tips. Eventually, Isobel herself solved the problem by falling in love with a very dirty little sweet-shop which announced that "Luncheons a spécialité" were provided. They climbed a narrow flight of stairs, and ate thick slices of damp brown ham in a little room overlooking the High Street.

"I am afraid I am not suited for the Simple Life," said Isobel mournfully; "the thought of a table-napkin makes me sigh. What is more, I don't feel hungry. Let's have cakes and ices, and be thoroughly childish."

#### (II)

It was delightfully cool under the trees in the Park after the climb from the sweet-shop. The bracken was growing high; and, here and there, deer were stealing about or standing quietly with bent necks cropping the grass. There were very few people about, and those who were there congregated chiefly upon the chairs near the entrance, so that directly the trees were reached London seemed very far away. After walking for some time, Michael discovered a plantation through which ran a path; and, lured by the thought of refreshing shade, he suggested that they should walk through it, and look for a place where they could sit. They soon left the path; and, after forcing their way through the undergrowth, came upon a spot that seemed designed for them. Under a large rhododendron bush there was a small open space, shaded by the wall of bracken that rose in front of it. There they camped; and Isobel, discarding her hat, sank down with a sigh of relief. Sitting there with her straight back, she looked so young and jolly that Michael felt an irresistible inclination to laugh with sheer delight at the sight of her.

"What is the matter, my child?" Isobel asked when he did so.

"You are such a quaint little object."

"Do you know, Bony, I feel very nice to-day. I think the barometer must have risen or something. Even you look passable."

They talked nonsense until Isobel, announcing her intention of going to sleep, slipped down until her head rested comfortably on her hand.

"Isobel, you do really like me, don't you?" he asked, bending over her.

"Yes—I'm sleepy."

"Dearest, you've no idea how I've wanted you."

"I've been bitten! Oh, these beastly gnats!" exclaimed Isobel, starting up abruptly and rubbing her wrist.

"Look!" She held out her hand for Michael to kiss. "Don't be a goose, please. Be a man—*aux armes!* Just look at them; how fat they are! They give me the creeps. Can't you slay them?"

The fight was furious, and, with the aid of his handkerchief, Michael slaughtered a considerable number of the enemy, while Isobel despatched the wounded. It was no good. They paid the penalty of sitting in a damp spot. The air grew thick with insects which, disturbed in their retreats among the leaves, came forth to join in the fray. At length the two intruders were compelled to retreat, both very hot and breathless. They sat on a seat beside the path, and Isobel rolled up her sleeve to survey the damage.

"Just look!"

"A comely arm, marry, come up."

"Don't be idiotic—scratch it!"

"No, the more you scratch it the worse the itch. Exercise your restraint."

"Please don't give me first-aid lessons to-day," said Isobel, ruefully surveying the angry-looking swelling on her arm. "Let's dash down to the pond and jump in."

Beyond disturbing them, the incident of the gnats appeared to have no importance. In reality it saved the day,

for Isobel had been on the verge of a confession. The irritation caused by her bitten arm drove the idea from her head; and when she remembered it, the intimate atmosphere necessary to her purpose no longer existed. So she banished the idea with the resolution, "Later on will do," and determined to have a good time. She was greatly changed, as was shown by the fact that she disliked the idea of marring her day with Michael. She had become fond of him; but, beyond sudden flashes of tenderness or brief intervals of passionate feeling, she was incapable of showing her heart. Michael dreaded to appear sentimental in public, and adopted an attitude of banter on such occasions. But from Isobel the spirit of mocking raillery was never far, and appeared upon all occasions.

After their secluded retreat in the plantation, the Park seemed very bare and public, and Michael suggested that they should go for a walk until it was time to have tea. Isobel agreed, but they did not get far on account of the heat, and finding a shady tree out in the open where there was most air they sat idly, too enervated to talk.

They had tea in the garden of the Lodge. When they arrived there, Isobel retired to titivate herself and returned radiant. The tea, although hot, was refreshing, and their conversation revived. Isobel was anxious to know what they could do afterwards.

"Are you going on the river?" she asked.

"No, thanks! Not with you in the stern. At any rate the river isn't much catch here; it's too near the sea, or something."

"I never heard that before. What shall we do then?"

"When we have digested these wicked-looking cakes it will be cool; I think we may as well stay up here."

"I mustn't be too late," Isobel murmured, throwing a tardy crumb to the proprieties.

"By the way, I never asked you about your brother," she

continued. "At least, I think it must be he—Roger Lawson?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"My dear!" Isobel opened her eyes in astonishment. "Do you really mean to say you haven't heard? He has become terrifically famous by inventing wireless electric light. You carry it about like candles. The papers were full of it, not long ago."

"I hardly ever see the papers." Michael was mildly interested. "Fancy Roger, well, I'm dashed!"

"You don't seem very excited. If I had a brother like that, I'd get something out of him."

"I dare say, but you see it's different."

"Doesn't he ever write to you?"

"No," replied Michael shortly.

"Well, I will send you a paper about it. I know I kept one."

"Did you, why?" asked Michael, suddenly interested.

"I don't know—to wrap butter in."

"No, but really?"

"Well, I was interested."

"Why were you interested?"

"Wasn't he your brother, you silly?"

"Oh, you dear!"

Here was something far more important than any invention.

In his delight, Michael forgot all about Roger. How wonderful it was that Isobel should have remembered him, and cared!

"Now, Bony, don't begin to make eyes—let's move."

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather go home now?" Michael murmured insincerely.

"I'm all right—let's stay."

The heat of the day was over, and everywhere Nature was preparing for the night. It was extraordinarily quiet;

and, as Isobel and Michael walked across the turf, they could hear the deer tearing up the grass with their lips. It was still light and the sun was well above the horizon, but the golden hue that the light possesses at evening in summer was apparent, and in the sky pathways of primrose were opening between the long narrow strips of cloud. Far away, so far that it sounded plaintive and alluring, a railway engine whistled and the note hung in the air before it died away. The more distant trees were beginning to look massy, and assumed a deep olive color.

With Isobel hanging upon his arm, and a pipe in his mouth, Michael felt humorously serene.

"Suppose you give me a pull," suggested Isobel, watching the blue smoke trail in the air.

"I couldn't spare one. It's the best pipe I have ever smoked; if an old woman came along and granted me three wishes I should say: 'May neither this pipe nor my breath go out, through the blessed Eternity,' to begin with."

"How about me?"

"You are a satellite of the pipe, so you would be there all right."

"Thanks."

"I feel like blessing the Squire and his relations this evening. Isn't it jolly?"

"Yes. Let's run races, or paddle in the pond."

"Madam! I am surprised at you. Do you know that there are vigilant gentlemen prowling through the jungle, whose purpose in life is to prevent indecent displays of that sort. You see they would shock the deer."

"Do you remember the day we paddled at Sempervale?"

"You, reminiscent! I thought you never looked back?"

"And you were so shocked."

"No, I wasn't."

"What were you feeling, then?"

"I was—guessing."

They had stopped, and for a moment they stood looking at each other strangely. At length Isobel broke the silence.

"You are a queer boy."

"Isobel!"

"No!—Bony—let me go. Not now. Bad dog; down!"

The air seemed to clear, and they moved on again. But Michael kept recalling the expression he had seen upon Isobel's face, and he asked himself, "What did she think? What does she mean?"

When the evening came on, they sat on the ground beneath the fence that bounded one of the scattered farms in the park.

Michael's good spirits had given place to a feeling of deep peace, and he sat with Isobel's hand in his own, looking out across the country that sloped away from their feet. Stars were twinkling palely in the sky, but the last light that lingered and mingled with the rays of the moon quickly faded. The trees grew shadowy and passed from sight. The ordinary life, that had fallen like a cast-off cloak from Michael when he started out in the morning, seemed hideous and unreal; like a dream half-remembered. He told himself that he had been mistaken in believing that life was wearisome; this peace alone was life. In the spirit he had been only just born, and endless vistas of tranquillity stretched before him. He saw himself passing, a happy traveler, from day to day with Isobel beside his heart. Surely, Love was the answer to the problem over which he had puzzled so long? It was all a mistake; this was Life, and Love was peace. He tapped his burned-out pipe on his foot, and turned to Isobel.

"You are a very silent person," he murmured tenderly.

"I'm hugely comfy. Oh, Bony, why did you spoil it all? I was dreaming."

"No, you weren't. We have only just woken up, Everything has just been a dream until this."

"Do you think so? I almost wish it was; but whether awake or asleep, I'm rather cold, do you know?"

"You had better come and sit on my knee." He hugged her to him, and for a time they sat in silence. His peaceful feeling gradually deserted him.

"I want a kiss, child."

"Oh, Bony, why did you make me sit on your knee?"

The moon passed slowly through the sky. A vague mist settled on the lower lands, and the shadow of the fence fell upon the two who were sitting beneath it, blotting them from sight. In Richmond barely a mile away the High Street was crowded with people passing to and fro, but beside the farm it was utterly silent. The other lovers in the park did not stray far from the gates. Suddenly something rustled in the grass.

"Michael! what was that?" asked Isobel, in a strained voice. Slipping from his arms she started to her feet.

"Only a deer; were you frightened?"

"Just a bit. I don't like being here, it is so quiet."

"We will go in a moment, but not just yet. Sit down again."

She sank on the ground beside him, and leaned back against the fence, saying:

"I'm going to sleep for five minutes, and then we will go."

Michael bent over her. "No, you aren't," he said, and saw her eyes shining very brightly. He felt her arms about his neck; and, suddenly his heart began to beat thickly.

### (III)

They took a taxi from Waterloo, and as Michael slammed the door behind him he said to himself, "Half an hour more." The taxi began to jolt down the hill outside the station, and he put his arm round Isobel.

"You look tired," he said.

"Yes, I am rather," she answered, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. "Bother my old hat!"

"I don't want to worry you," said Michael, "but I want to say just one thing."

"Yes?"

"Well," he paused, noticing her indifference, and continued in a more restrained key, "Do listen; I want to tell you that I am going to work like a nigger. I shall soon get a better job—and, if you don't mind roughing it a bit, I think we can be married fairly soon."

"Oh, no!" Isobel opened her eyes abruptly. "You mustn't talk nonsense." She remembered her forgotten intention. If only she had told him earlier in the day! She was annoyed at herself, but she had never supposed that he would be so silly.

"But, my darling, what do you mean?"

"I mean I can't marry you."

Michael was thunderstruck. Palaces fell in ruins about his ears.

"Surely you don't mean to say that you won't marry me, after this evening?"

"I can't, I tell you," replied Isobel, frowning. "Please, Bony, don't say any more."

"Why not?" Michael asked relentlessly.

"Because I am married already, you goose. Surely you knew?" she replied, almost laughing at his amazement.

"Of course I didn't, and what is more, you knew that I didn't." Michael felt sick with despair. Never had he dreamed of such a possibility. "Where is your wedding-ring then?" he asked, with a ray of hope, having noticed that her finger was bare.

"In my jewel-case."

He drew his arm from her. For a moment he grappled with the idea, unable to grasp it. Then a blind rage swept over him. He was always the butt of Fate, and Isobel was

the cause. It seemed quite clear to him that his misfortunes had been due to her, and he felt that he had known it always. It was not so much that he was morally offended, as that his pride was cut to the quick. Isobel had been playing with him; she had been laughing at him when he revealed his heart. He could not bear her presence; and, leaning from the window, he told the driver to stop.

Isobel was astounded; she could not understand what possessed him.

"Bony, dear, please don't be foolish. It's not as if I'm not fond of you, I am. I love you. I really do. Oh, Bony, we can always see each other if only you will stay. I am so often in town; what does it matter? You have always asked me to be fond of you; and, now that I am, surely you won't leave me? Tell him to go on," she implored. She was almost crying—her wayward heart snared at last.

"Shut up! You can laugh over your joke alone," snapped Michael, jumping out of the taxi. Grotesquely he leaned back, and added, "Damn you! I've had enough of you."

In a moment he had paid the man and stalked off. He was almost beside himself, and did not realize how melodramatic his conduct had been. "I've done with her," he repeated to himself, and shuddered with revulsion. For some time he walked straight on, not caring where he went. When he looked up, he found that he was in the Mall, and remembered that he must get to the Hampstead Road. He felt dazed and ill.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### REACTION

#### (I)

MICHAEL rose next morning, after an almost sleepless night, with a sense of acute mental depression. After arriving home the evening before, he had lain for hours with his mind working at high tension, and his thoughts leading him in frenzied circles round his passion. Already his anger was merging into regret. He realized too late that he did not know even to whom Isobel was married, nor where she lived. After his outburst of anger had died away, he was acutely anxious to see her again, and to hear the explanation that he had interrupted by leaving her. He told himself that he had done with her, and he believed that it was true; but he wanted to see her. It did not seem right that she should fade so suddenly from his life; that one day they should be everything to each other, and the next parted and unable to find each other. The thought that, unless Isobel herself came forward, he could never find her, made him wist in spite of himself. His chief difficulty was the fact that, notwithstanding his conviction to the contrary, he was still in love with her. The idea of losing her was hateful, but he could not bring himself to think of sharing her with another. The knowledge that another man possessed her made him grind his teeth, and he looked at his breakfast with distaste.

He had often failed and been disappointed in his hopes, but to adopt the attitude of a sport of Fate would not rob the present reverse of its sting. The prospect of going back

to his work, and of sitting day after day at the piano in the Picturedrome, was almost unbearable. Michael knew perfectly well that for weeks he would search eagerly among the faces in the audience for that of Isobel, and he had a presentiment that he would never find it. He tried to imagine what she would do, and he found it difficult to believe that she would go so far as to come to look for him. He felt sure that if he could find her, she would laughingly dismiss the past, and frankly invite him to share the present, but he would not be able to trace her. The only clue he had to her whereabouts was the fact that she was staying with an aunt in Kensington, but he remembered that her visit was nearing its end, and that any day she might leave London. The one ray of hope was the fact that she had told him, just before he left her, that she loved him. He felt sure she meant it; and the memory of her tearful eyes assured him that she had at any rate genuinely believed it then. Perhaps after all she would come to the theatre one day, and then she would explain. He brushed aside the questions that rose as to the gist of her explanation, because somewhere in his heart he felt that his dream would never come true, and there lurked in his mind the bitter knowledge that, after all, Isobel had been merely amusing herself with him most of the time she had known him. He wondered how many others she had kissed in fleeting waves of passion, or caused grotesquely to caper for an idle whim. She was so hard to understand. Neither bad nor good enough to have a definite purpose in her actions, she was swayed by a streak of freakish humor that was in her. She was undoubtedly selfish; yet at times she was impulsively generous, and her warm heart would bring tears of sympathy to her eyes in a moment at the sight of a stranger's distress. It was only her friends who were expected to be automatons.

Michael spent the morning walking, as he did usually

when he was deeply moved, believing in it with superstitious veneration as an infallible remedy for unrest. Although it was Monday morning, there were a considerable number of lovers walking about together, and the sight of their happiness annoyed him. He wanted to plunge them into despair, in order that they might share his loneliness. The fact that his work would not begin again until the afternoon caused a nightmare-like holiday-feeling to be in the air. He felt as if he were sharing the beauty of the morning on false pretenses, and he almost looked forward to being at the Picturedrome once more.

#### (II)

When Michael was told, upon his arrival, that the manager wished to see him, he knew at once that his absence on the previous day had been discovered, and he wondered if there was going to be a fuss about it. But he worried himself very little about it, for his work seemed to have become sordid and unimportant.

Mr. Potter seldom bothered his head about the Picturedrome on Sundays, but preferred to spend the week-ends at Brighton, where he was certain to meet at least one of the strangely-garbed ladies whom he numbered among his acquaintances. On this occasion he was disappointed at the last moment, the friend with whom he was to have spent the week-end having been unable to go, and, finding that the time hung heavily upon his hands, he decided to drop in at the theatre in order to see how things were going. He could not have chosen a worse time to go, so far as Michael was concerned. The man who had taken his place at the piano was perfectly qualified to play any ordinary pieces, but he could not play by ear. Unfortunately, no one had remembered to remove the poster upon which Michael's performance was announced outside the Picturedrome; and, notwithstanding the announcement made from

time to time by one of the attendants that, owing to the sudden indisposition of M. Francois Blanche, the usual program could not be carried out, a band of young Americans, who were among the audience, determined to amuse themselves by noisy protest. When Mr. Potter arrived, the theatre was in a state of tumult; and, infected by the original protesters, a large number of young men were noisily demanding the return of their money. Eventually the police were called in, and the price of the seats returned, but not until the whole story of Michael's truancy had leaked out. Mr. Potter, already irritable on account of the dull day he had spent, was furious. Not content with seeing the audience diminish week by week, here was the star-performer casually strolling off without giving him any notice. The result was that he ordered Michael to be sent to his office as soon as he arrived next day.

Mr. Potter was one of the viciously inclined men who, when they have attained to a post of authority, are intensely sensitive to imaginary attempts upon their dignity, and who vent their spleen upon their subordinates. He had been nursing his rage all night, and gave rein to it directly Michael entered.

"Where were you yesterday?" he asked, scowling. Previously, Michael had always been subservient to this man upon whom his livelihood depended, but now he scarcely cared what happened, and disgusted by the other's manner, he answered insolently:

"At Richmond."

"What the devil were you doing there?"

"Minding my own business," snapped Michael, flushing with anger.

"Well, you can mind it for good, so far as I'm concerned. I've had enough of your airs, do you hear!" retorted Mr. Potter. "Here's your money for the week, and you can clear out."

Michael signed a receipt, boiling inwardly. He longed to utter a crushing retort, but he could think of nothing that would not leave the honors of the day in Mr. Potter's hands, and with an effort he controlled himself and left the room in silence.

He felt dazed, and wondered vaguely what form his next reverse would take. He had lost Isobel, and his situation within twenty-four hours; both greatly through his own fault. He knew that, had he been sufficiently humble, Mr. Potter would have relented, in order that he might not lose the pleasure of tyrannizing over him in the future. As he passed through the empty theatre, Michael realized that he had lost also his only opportunity of seeing Isobel again: if she came he would be there no longer. In the vestibule the commissionnaire was standing buttoning the coat of his uniform. Michael always had liked this man who had been the first person he saw when he came to apply for the position of pianist, and he determined partly to confide in him.

"Briggs," he said, "I've got some news for you."

"I hope it is good news then, sir," replied the other.

"I have just got the sack."

"Do you mean to say 'e's given you the bird!" exclaimed the other, incredulous. "What I should like to know is, 'oo will come if you aren't here to play any longer?"

"Steady on, it's not so bad as all that, I hope."

"Well, it will make a lot of difference." He hesitated a moment, and then continued, "Excuse my asking, sir—but have you decided what you will do?"

"Oh, I think I know of another job I can get," replied Michael, ashamed to confess how blank his prospects appeared.

"I'm very glad to hear that, I'm sure, but if I might say so, sir: if by any chance, though I have no doubt you will

get a post heavy enough, you should be unable to suit yourself, my missus 'as a spare room what's empty, and we should be only too glad if you would use it till you settle down."

Profoundly touched by this unexpected kindness, Michael thanked him.

"By the way, Briggs, if by any chance any one should inquire here for me, I wonder if you would mind taking a message for me?"

"I should be very pleased to, sir."

"It would be a lady—you might just say that I am no longer here, but that you can give me any message. I will come now and then to see if you have anything to tell me," Michael hesitated, feeling that he ought to give the other a tip, but afraid that it might be resented. Finally he decided not to do so, and merely repeated his intention of looking round after a few days to hear if there was any news for him.

Michael felt glad that he had arranged things so that if Isobel really wanted to see him she could find him. But he could not avoid facing the fact that he was in a very awkward position. He had, it was true, a week's salary in his pocket, in addition to about thirty shillings that remained from a nest-egg of five pounds, after buying the necessary clothing for his outings with Isobel, and paying for their day at Richmond. Sixty-five shillings, however, will not go very far in London; and, after paying for his lodgings until the end of the week, he would have only forty-five shillings between him and actual want. The obvious thing to do was to set to work to obtain another situation at once; and, with that idea, he entered a Public Library, and searched the advertisement columns of the newspapers for notices of vacant posts in picture-houses. There were three; and as soon as he arrived home he wrote applying for them, praying fervently that no reference would be required, for he knew

that it would be useless to approach his late manager for one.

When Michael had posted the letters, there was nothing whatever to do; and the momentary respite from his misery that the recent excitement and need for action had given him having ended, he fell into a state of mental stupor. He could not bear to think of the day before, since when so many things had happened, and his thoughts traveled back through the years of his life. Everywhere he had failed, and his memories made him sink deeper into despair. This depression lasted through the two days that elapsed before any answer to his applications came. On Thursday morning he looked through his things, in the hope that he might find something worth pawning. He was astonished to find how few things he possessed that were of any value; his silver watch and chain only fetched eight and sixpence, and he was unable to obtain so much as that for a large pile of music which he carried laboriously to a second-hand dealer in Charing Cross Road. On Friday he went to the Picture-drome, only to find that Isobel had not asked for him; but, when he reached home again, he found awaiting two replies from the picture-houses to which he had written, stating that the situations had been filled. He spent the afternoon walking to the third, which was in Clapton, where he was equally unsuccessful. Driven into a corner, he played his last card by writing to Strickland. He had refrained from doing so until driven by necessity, for he disliked the idea of begging for favors from some one with whom he no longer considered himself friendly.

Next morning when Strickland wired in reply, "Come Supper Sunday Eight," Michael tried to remember what he had said in his letter, and hoped that he had not been sentimental. His chief feeling, however, was one of thankfulness that he had another chance.

## (III)

When Michael arrived at the house, the door was opened by Strickland himself. During the eight months that had elapsed since his success, a subtle change had taken place in his appearance. The hollows in his cheeks had filled out; and, instead of looking thin, his face was rather too fleshy, and looked coarse. He had allowed his hair to grow long, and his dress was slightly that of a dandy.

"I'm glad you've come at last," he said, "though just now we are in rather a muck, as we are moving. You were just in time to catch us."

"You look remarkably prosperous," observed Michael, "but why the long hair? I thought we both detested it."

"Well, so I do; but, my dear chap, it pays; however, you shall hear all about it afterwards. Now you must come and see my mother."

Mrs. Strickland, unlike her son, had changed in no way at all. She looked so much the same that Michael felt she must have been sitting in the same place, knitting the same endless garment ever since he had seen her last. She seemed inevitable, not as a human being, but as the most important feature in the furniture of the room; as if during long years of peace she had sat in her easy-chair till she had absorbed the spirit of the room into her most intimate being. She was alert enough, however, when Michael entered, and taxed him with not having come over before.

"I dare say Basil has been very busy—and, so far as that goes, I have too," answered Michael, rather pointlessly. He wondered how he had managed to exist so long without seeing Mrs. Strickland's cheerful face again, and hearing her comfortable and kindly voice.

During dinner, the object of Michael's visit was avoided, and the conversation centred round the new house into which the Stricklands were to move the following week. Strickland himself had lost none of his popularity, and the

united applause of critics and public resulted in his making a considerable amount of money. He had been very comfortable in the old house, but policy demanded that he should entertain people, and he had decided to take a flat in Kensington over which his mother would preside.

While these plans were described, Michael contrasted his own lot with that of Strickland; and, while not trying to belittle the ability of the latter, he felt that his success had been largely a question of luck. If he himself had been able to obtain a fair hearing, all that would have been necessary afterwards would have been advertisement, and his agent would have managed that. By now he might have been wearing a fur-lined coat with the astrakan collar dear to the profession. The idea made him smile ruefully, but he found it difficult to realize his true position while he sat there in the comfortable room. It was so much more simple to imagine that there had been a mistake, and that afterwards all would come right.

At the end of the meal, Mrs. Strickland got up and moved towards the door. As Michael opened it for her, she said, "I dare say you two boys will have a lot to say to each other," and she glanced at her son, as if to remind him of some secret understanding. When she left the room, the two who remained drew their chairs together and lit their pipes. Poised like a hawk was the uncomfortable consciousness that before long they would have to turn to a topic unpleasant to both of them. For a time they discussed indifferent subjects, each waiting for the other to break the ice. At length Strickland took the step.

"I'm awfully sorry to hear that you've been having such rotten bad luck, Lawson—have another glass," he said, pushing the spirits they were drinking towards his guest.

"I have rather, as you know," replied Michael, busying himself with his glass, in order to hide his embarrassment. "And I sincerely hope that you will be able to put me up to

a job, though I hate having to bother you with my rotten affairs."

"Not a bit of it. Only I wish I felt I could be of more use, but you know it is rather hard to know what I can do. By the way," continued Strickland, vigorously knocking the ashes from his pipe, "the mater wants you to come and stay with us for a bit till you are settled. You must excuse the mess we are in."

"It's awfully good of her—and you," replied Michael, "but I don't think I will. I won't be more of a nuisance than I can help;" and he laughed to show that he had full command of himself, but his laugh was not very certain.

"Rot!" protested Strickland. "You will be devilish useful. I don't mind telling you that we were quite selfish enough to realize that you would be able to help us with the move. Solemn."

"No; I shall be all right, thanks very much, old chap; in fact, I shall be moving too. But, look here, don't you know of anything at all that I could do?"

"We-el, I might get Schezhaus to give you the solo part in my Concerto next month," answered Strickland, doubtfully; "but that is only one job, and I take it that you want something more or less permanent."

"Of course I should prefer it; besides I couldn't do that. I am so fearfully out of practice. I have given up all ideas of that sort of thing. It would be hopeless to attempt it —" Splendid vistas seemed to fade from sight. "To tell you the truth I was wondering if you could get me copying to do or anything."

"Oh, *that*—yes I could. But do you think it's worth the candle? I should be only too glad for you to do my stuff, because then I should know that it was in sound hands, but I don't have much, and other people pay so damned rottenly."

"My dear chap, I shall be glad of anything, and of course

in any case, you aren't to think of paying any more than other people. When one is eating humble-pie one gets very particular over split hairs; if you tried to I should bolt."

It was soon arranged that Michael should start working for Strickland at once, while the latter undertook to try and find other people who wanted copying done, and get the work for Michael.

The ordeal over, the air seemed to clear, and the friendly phrases that were uttered became more sincere. Strickland was curious about the way in which Michael had lost his situation, and once or twice angled for enlightenment, saying in a sympathetic voice:

"I must say, it was very bad luck your getting the sack. I can't imagine how it happened!"

Michael intended to leave him ignorant; but, as the evening wore on, the whisky he had drunk began to take effect, and he felt sentimental. Losing partly his feeling of despair, he began to crave for sympathy.

In the end he opened the subject himself.

"I must say I am rather cut up about it all," he said, gazing hard at the ceiling as he lay back in his armchair. He contracted his brows as if examining something of great interest.

"I suppose old Potty, or whatever he was called, acted the cad in some way?" Strickland suggested obligingly.

"Well, not altogether," replied Michael magnanimously. "I cut away last Sunday—I don't think I ever told you, but I have been very fond of a girl all my life. I knew her first when we were both kids. Well, last week she turned up suddenly after years and years, and I couldn't resist the temptation of spending a day with her, and we went to Richmond and had a ripping time. And then—oh, well, I found out she was married. I had never guessed it, and altogether I felt so damnably down that I didn't care what happened, and when Potter hauled me up for cutting off

without leave, I snapped back at him and he gave me the boot."

"Poor old chap—how rotten."

"I shouldn't mind so much, if it wasn't for that about the girl—it takes the heart out of one," said Michael, whose cheeks were burning with the drama of the moment.

"I know," murmured Strickland, who was feeling delightfully comfortable, "it is rotten."

As he walked home hugging a bundle of manuscript music, Michael felt that something had been wanting in his friend's sympathy, and he regretted having said as much as he had. It was a bad sign; for when confidences between friends are regretted, friendship's days are numbered.

#### (IV)

Secure of a livelihood for the moment, Michael felt hope stir within him for the first time since he parted from Isobel. He began to believe it possible that after all he might escape the fate of being all his days the living monument to a dead passion, and exist to some purpose. Until then he seemed to have been confronted by a thick mist that cowed him, while it veiled the future. As the days passed, he began to take a faint zest in life, and found that familiarity had not staled the fascination of arranging his scanty belongings in the new lodgings to which he moved in order to economize.

Strickland kept his word, and was able to supply Michael with as much copying as he could do. The work was trying and the pay was small, but by working hard he found that he could earn enough to support himself, so long as he lived with great care to avoid expense. After a time, through his friend's introduction, Michael was able to obtain employment as accompanist for a few hours a week, and he enjoyed the contact with those of his own class that this work gave him. Towards the end of November, what seemed great good fortune fell his way; for the indefati-

gable Strickland persuaded a partner in a well-known firm of pianoforte-makers with whom he was friendly, to engage Michael to represent the firm at a Musical Exhibition to be held in Brussels the following spring. Thenceforth Michael lived for May, in which month the exhibition was to open. It would give him regular employment for nearly five months, at the princely salary of a hundred and fifty pounds a year; far more than he had ever earned before. It was largely owing to the fact that he had this to look forward to, that he was able to remain fairly cheerful through the trying winter.

He did not see very much of the Stricklands, although Basil did so much for him. The work of copying was laborious, and as he was paid by the piece, Michael devoted every possible moment to it, and it was only when his supply of work ran low that he was able to take a holiday. He managed to walk across to Kensington every few weeks, however: and, if no one else was there, he would spend an hour with Mrs. Strickland, who was always at home, although her son more often than not was absent paying calls of policy. Michael always enjoyed these hours with Mrs. Strickland, not only because her gossip was invariably entertaining, but because he felt that he was welcome. When he was there, he was able to forget for a time that he lived very much the life of a slave, and the pleasure of feeling that he was not entirely an outcast was very great.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### INTERLUDE

(I)

MICHAEL arrived in Brussels with the aid of a loan that Strickland had forced upon him. For a long time, he had resisted his inclination to take advantage of the help the other offered, knowing how difficult it would be to repay. In the end, the necessity of buying new clothes forced him to yield, and the novelty of spending several pounds at a time was so delightful that he soon overcame his first feeling of regret at becoming indebted. He had been afraid that by leaving London, and cutting himself off from those who gave him work, he would endanger his chance of making a livelihood when he returned, but he was reassured by his friend's optimistic assurance that there would be no difficulty in finding plenty of other people in need of a good copyist. Michael also began to build hopes upon a hint dropped by Strickland that it might not be necessary to return to his old work at all. He did not know that, in reality, nothing more than a good-natured desire to make things comfortable for Michael, and to cheer him up, had prompted this rather rash prophecy.

The freshness of Brussels was a revelation to Michael, who had seen no other large town except London, unless it had been from the windows of a railway carriage. The bright aspect of the houses, and the casual way in which dirt and cleanliness were allowed to mingle in the streets captivated him. It was curious to be in a place where every one from the smallest child in the gutter could speak French,

and Michael was extraordinarily pleased with himself when he was able to follow the conversation of his neighbors in trams or at the café, and shamelessly he eavesdropped on all occasions. His faulty knowledge of French had been one of the chief difficulties with which he met when he applied for his present situation. But the fact that another representative of Schemeyer's, and one who knew several languages, was to be in Brussels with Michael, had been considered sufficient, coupled with the fact that after a little practice Michael would be able to speak the language sufficiently well to make himself understood. He soon overcame his first feeling of shyness in the display of his linguistic powers; and, when he had to make a purchase, entered several shops before admitting that he was suited, simply in order to practise his French.

The greater part of the day until ten o'clock at night had to be spent at the exhibition, which was at the foot of the *Avenue de la Course*, but after a time he was able to make arrangements with the other man, whose name was Callowfield, by which each had several free hours during the day. It was dull work sitting in the pavilion in which was the Schemeyer stand. For several hours at a time, the crowd would dawdle past without any one showing any interest in the pianos. Now and then, a possible purchaser would arrive, and Michael was called upon to put an instrument through its paces while Callowfield expatiated upon its tone, action, and all the other things that went to make it exactly what the auditor desired. Whenever a piano was sold, the two young men celebrated the event by spending part of the commission due to them in highly colored drinks at one of the many cafés scattered about the grounds.

During the day, Michael seldom left the exhibition, but spent his free time in wandering round looking idly at the exhibits. He soon grew tired of doing so, and after the first month he fell into the habit of frequenting a little café,

from the raised terrace of which he could watch the stream of passers-by. The principal feature of the exhibition was music, but the proprietors, recognizing that in order to attract local people something more must be provided, allowed a considerable part of the grounds to be occupied by the various side-shows that appear in other exhibitions. The crowd, therefore, was as varied as any one could wish, and Michael looked upon all sorts and conditions of men, from the extravagantly dressed dilettanti who were attracted by the concerts, to the bright-eyed grisettes seeking whom they might devour. In addition to the ordinary staff of waiters attached to the *café*, there was a boy messenger, whose scarlet uniform obtained for him the nickname of *Le p'tit diable rouge*, and with him Michael, as a regular customer, got on speaking terms. *Le diable* was amusing, and gallantly undertook to teach Michael French in exchange for lessons in English. The lessons began in the most elementary way, very similar to that now adopted in schools; the boy would hold up a fork and say *fourchette*, rolling his eyes in agonized efforts to control his mirth. In return for this information, Michael was expected to volunteer the English "fork," which the Diable would repeat as "fok." After a time, Michael was considered to have progressed sufficiently to turn to more advanced matters, and he picked up a stock of *argot*, and surprising information not to be found within the pages of *Baedeker*.

## (II)

The episode in Richmond Park had affected Michael so deeply that, while he was in Brussels, he took very little notice of the girls who everywhere displayed their prettiest frocks. He felt that something had scorched his heart and withered its emotions. His infatuation for Isobel, originally the first passion of a boy singularly ignorant of such feel-

ings, had grown to hold a place of such importance in his life that, when at last it was ended, it was not very far from being the great passion he fondly imagined it to be.

Callowfield, a stout young man with lank black hair which he trained with great care in the way it should go, had no such wound to nurse, and sat all day long with his nose thrust out, spying for a pretty face. These two faithful stewards spent many hours, the one in watching virgins, wise and unwise, the other scowling into vacancy. Against his will, Michael was drawn into many arguments by his companion, who was quite impervious to any hints that silence was preferable. That they were beneficial was shown by the fact that, towards the end of the third month, Michael often found it necessary to make his thoughts gloomy by a conscious effort; the irrepressible spirit of youth was beginning to thrust its way through the ashes in his heart.

Michael and his companion did not spend by any means all their time alone when they were on duty. From time to time, especially towards evening, one or more friends of Callowfield would pay a visit to the stand.

They were invariably feminine, and as they lounged in the luxurious chairs provided for the use of customers, paid but little attention to Michael, who preferred to withdraw in silence to the extreme end of the stand and sit with his back to them watching the crowds. Among those who came most often was a young girl with wavy brown hair and the happiest of laughs, who seemed almost to live in the exhibition. One day when business had been very slack, Callowfield left the stand earlier than usual, leaving Michael in charge. Hardly had he gone, when the girl just described came down the passage leading to the stand. Michael felt cold and uneasy, and hoped that when she saw that he was alone she would go. Not so, however, for without betraying the least concern she sank into a chair and eyed him.

"You spik English; *n'est ce pas?*"

"Yes, it's lucky you do, too, because I am pretty hopeless at French."

"Your friend, he is gone for long?"

"He will be back in an hour, I expect."

"Then I will go. I am very beesy, I have so many friends," she said, and, without any more ado, tripped off, leaving Michael in a strange state of mingled relief and disappointment at the shortness of the visit.

When Callowfield returned, Michael told him of the visitor he had missed, and learned that her name was Suzanne. It appeared that Callowfield had been far more seriously captivated by her than Michael had supposed; so much so that he looked forward to leaving Brussels with dread, and even considered the possibility of marriage. Michael strongly opposed such a step.

"She may like you," he said, "but she likes a dozen others just as much. It would be rank madness to marry; it would only end in misery. You have not an idea or taste in common, and those are what count."

"She wouldn't have me if I asked her to," replied the other dismally.

"A jolly good thing too, if you ask me."

"Hang it all! How can you know her, when you have hardly spoken a dozen words to her? Look here; suppose you come out somewhere with us one evening, and I bet you will soon own that you are mistaken about her. Her frivolity hides a heart of gold."

Resisting an inclination to smile, Michael asked what was to happen to the stand while they were absent. Callowfield was ready with explanations.

"That's all right," he said. "The cafés in the *Bois* don't begin to wake up until this place shuts. You bottle yourself up so much that I doubt if you know one end of the town from the other."

Michael smilingly admitted the impeachment, and they arranged to go the following Sunday evening.

Half an hour after closing time on Sunday found them with Suzanne in the *Bois de la Course*, where, in the clearings among the trees, *Cafés Chantants* were being held. The forest was extremely dark, and, when first they entered the circle of one of the cafés at which they intended to sit, the glare of the light made them blink. A crowd of people were sitting at the little tables talking, laughing, drinking, and smoking, while above their voices could be heard the sound of a song, or the music of a dance. The ring of illuminations formed a magic circle within which the ordinary life of the pleasure-seeker went on, while beyond it the shadows of remorseful phantoms passed among the trees. Now and then parties would come to join the crowd at the tables, but, more often than not, the audience melted away two by two to seek the solitude of the forest. As he sat sipping coffee, Michael reflected that it might well have been the apotheosis of Hampstead Heath, and glancing at the circle of lights behind the chairs, it seemed as if it served as a curtain to hide from prying eyes the caresses of the woodland lovers.

In a fortnight the exhibition was to close, and while Callowfield talked earnestly to Suzanne, Michael considered his own position. His feelings were mixed. He knew that, when he left Brussels, his days of ease would be over, but the pilgrim in him, the adventurer lurking in all young hearts, made him elate at the prospect of breaking from the life he was leading, and faring to seek fortune in new fields. The possibility of entire failure seemed remote; he had sufficient faith in Strickland's judgment to believe that he would always be able to obtain work as a copyist. But his mind reverted to Strickland's hint of better things, and he came to the conclusion that it meant he was to obtain a permanent situation in Schemeyer's upon his return. That would be a great deal, but, if only he could climb back to

the place whence he had fallen! Callowfield was nice enough, but he was after all little more than a shop assistant, and the outlook was rather dreary if the future was to be spent among such people.

His mind came back to his companions, and he eyed Suzanne with curiosity. He was amused by the calmness with which she accepted Callowfield's admiration; she made no attempt to conceal the obvious fact that, for her, he would be out of sight, out of mind. Possibly there was something about her nonchalant attitude that touched into response the chord in Michael's heart that he had grown to associate with Isobel. Reserved and conventional as he really was, the whimsical and rather elvish characters of girls like Suzanne attracted him strongly.

Suzanne, who was sitting peering about with bright eyes at the neighbors, from time to time called Callowfield's attention to those who struck her as being out of the ordinary.

*"Regardez!"*

"What?"

"There is a friend of mine; he ——"

It was always "he," and Michael was amused by the frank way in which she responded to the glances that from time to time were cast in her direction.

"You really are rather outrageous," he said, smiling at her, as she rolled her expressive eyes in the direction of a dapper young man who was caressing his mustache not far off. She turned happily to consider the remark.

"Yes? perhaps so. But not to have friends would be very dull."

"I should like very much to know what is in that small nodule of yours," said Michael.

"Nodule?" inquired Suzanne, and then in response to a gesture of his, "Oh—yess!" and she was greatly tickled by the idea.

"I wonder how many 'friends' you have; a hundred?"

Michael changed his question, for the benefit of Callowfield, who was listening with interest.

"I do not know—perhaps," admitted Suzanne, casting up her eyes in computation.

"I suppose you wouldn't care twopence if you never saw any of them again?"

"Oh, yess, I should be sorry. But of course —"

"Not very much?"

"I should have other friends."

Her philosophy was simple, and perhaps more satisfactory than the involved codes that such as Michael strove to understand.

When she left them, Callowfield was anxious to know what sort of impression Suzanne had made.

"Isn't she a peach?" he asked.

"Yes, that's just it—peaches lose their bloom," Michael replied.

"I didn't ask you to try and be clever," growled Callowfield, nettled. "And, what is more, I don't care a damn what you say. I shall marry her."

"I shall have no scruples about leaving you here, because I know as well as you do that she won't have you," replied Michael laughingly.

The fact that he had spent an evening in the company of an attractive girl without falling in love with her, made him believe that he had become a philosopher. He was so taken with the idea, that he forgot to spend his last waking moments in mental lamentations as he was accustomed to do.

#### (IV)

When he returned from Brussels, Michael was richer by the sum of twenty pounds which he had saved, and by the knowledge, although he would have denied it, that the depression following the loss of Isobel was not incurable. Had he realized it, Destiny, in heaping tribulations upon his

head, had helped to minimize the blow his heart had received. Unable continually to concentrate his thoughts on Isobel, the insinuating agony of such meditation was denied him, and the necessity to provide for his purely physical needs had helped him, to some extent, to forget those of his spirit. The previous winter remained in his memory as a period of black despair, from the blank surface of which no individual incident rose prominently. When, in the spring, he was able to free himself entirely from his old life for a time, the wound in his heart began to heal. Suzanne with her prying eyes hastened the process of revealing it to him, and by the end of the summer his state was very much what it had been a year previously. He did not dare to let his mind dwell upon Isobel, but the fact that he was able greatly to control it was in itself a proof that the worst was past. Her influence still remained as a background to all his actions, and frequently he found himself thinking that he would tell her this or that, but despair had given place to occasional depression.

The Sunday after he reached London, Michael walked over to Kensington, but he found the Stricklands' flat empty. There was a letter for him from Basil, upon the envelope of which Mrs. Strickland had added, "You must not forget us! We shall look forward to seeing you when we return." Michael opened the envelope with a sense of foreboding which the contents did not appear to justify.

"DEAR LAWSON (the letter ran),

"I am sorry I shall not be in town when you return, but I have had a first-rate offer for a tour in the States. I am to conduct some of my things, and generally to turn up when I am wanted—there seems to be a bit of a boom on over there about me! The whole thing was rushed through at a breathless pace, which explains why I have not written to let you know until now. The plans were only arranged definitely a few days ago; and, since signing the contract, I have had scarcely a

moment in which to call my soul my own; what with buying clothes, and making a million idiotic arrangements. I am guaranteed my expenses, however, so I am doing myself well."

After saying that he had written to various people asking them to give Michael copying to do, Strickland continued:

"As you know, I half hoped we could have fixed up a provincial tour together. I meant to do it on rather a big scale, carting an orchestra about, with you as Court-pianist, which would have given you a decent opening. But you know who disposes, and we must hope to be able to fix it up when I return. I expect to be away at least a year, and the Mater means to stay with various relations in Worcester, where she rather thinks of taking a house.

"Mind you write and say how the world treats you, and of course you know that, if anything goes wrong, you must let me give you a hand over the difficulty. We know each other well enough to make that all right.

"Ever yours,

"BASIL STRICKLAND."

So that had been the secret: a tour in the Provinces! Strickland was a good sort after all, but Michael wished that when the plan was no longer feasible it might have been left unspoken. It was disappointing to find that the Stricklands, his only friends in London, had been taken so unexpectedly from him. But, resolutely refusing to be downcast, Michael turned his eyes towards the future. He looked forward to the following year, and refused to think about the intervening months.

## CHAPTER XXV

### RELAPSE

(I)

IT was only the necessity for economy that kept Michael fit during this part of his life. He had never been good at games, but even had he wished to indulge in them his poverty would have made it almost impossible for him to do so. Fares form so large an item in the expenditure of those who live in London that he had decided to abolish them some time ago. This of course necessitated a great deal of walking, especially as his patrons were scattered throughout the suburbs. Those who lived far off sent their work by post, but to walk from the Hampstead Road to South Kensington and back, for example, is a considerable distance, so that, whether he desired it or not, Michael got a good deal of exercise. It had disadvantages, in that it wore out his boots; and, still more important, occupied a great deal of time. Sometimes as he swung through the streets with his chin slightly tilted up, he calculated the number of pages of manuscript that he could copy at fourpence a page during the time he spent on foot. Although he was exposed to all weathers, his purse was too slender to allow of his providing himself with suitable clothes, so that during the winter months he had a perpetual cold in his head.

One evening in November his landlady, who socially was several grades below Mrs. Hobby, remonstrated with him.

"Your cold is that bad, sir, you didn't ought to go out as you do," she said, severely.

Punctuating his periods with coughs, Michael took a

cheerful view of it. "I don't go for fun, as I dare say you know, Mrs. Wineheart," he said.

"It is your portion, I won't deny; but, so long as you do continue, you will 'ave it. One of these fine days you will be ill, and then you will repent. Was that that there bell rung? It's that there Mr. Fellows, drat 'im, 'e don't give a body a moment's peace," and she stumped out to minister to "that there Fellows," whom Michael imagined sitting by his fire inventing pretexts to ring the bell.

It was all very well to laugh, but Mrs. Wineheart's admonition alarmed Michael more than he liked. Standing in front of the cracked overmantel, he decided that his face was more flushed than it ought to be. It would be all up if he was once bowled over—what the deuce could he do? After all, they could hardly throw him into the street. If only he could rest and be quiet for a few days, he could get rid of his cold—but work! He turned rather wearily to the table, and arranged his papers. Why did people write such dull stuff? How his head ached, and tobacco would only make it worse! "Oh, my head aches—it does ache," he murmured stupidly. A phrase from Keats came into his head:

"My head aches, and a drowsy pain  
Numbs all my senses —"

That was not right. "My head aches —" How did it go? As he stood by the table, swaying slightly with giddiness, he fretted his memory for the quotation. He knew where to find it in a moment; it was in the "Ode to a Nightingale." He would get the book, and look it up. It was only when he had crossed the room that he remembered he had no longer any books. When was it he used to have a row of them—where was it? His head swam so much that he gave up the problem, and sought his chair. "My head aches," he murmured dully, and, abruptly, the walls

seemed to rush in upon him. Peace—peace—he would lie quite still, and be quiet. . . .

The recurring impressions of people watching him resolved themselves into a voice droning with deadened excitement. He felt too peaceful to try and follow the conversation, but here and there a word punctuated his sense without conveying any meaning. "Horspittle . . . so I says . . . cooked 'is goose . . . yes, sir. . . ." He was faintly annoyed by the voice, but the languorous ease of his body was so great that he could not make the effort necessary for a protest. Quietly, like a ship stealing from its moorings, he floated once more into oblivion.

Michael did not fully recover consciousness until he was safely berthed in hospital. Even then he took his presence there as a matter of course. The far distant ceiling, the nurses, and the various people who came and went, seemed naturally to form a part of his life. It was only when the spout of a feeding-cup was forced between his lips that he was compelled to concentrate his faculties. Feeding became a great task, a problem to be solved. It was something that seemed beyond his power to accomplish. But the delight of sinking back afterwards into a state of vegetating was exquisite. It was ecstasy robbed of its sting. When the crisis was past, and his body mending, life became less pleasing. He found that he had a cough. It seemed as if the irritation in his lungs grew through long hours, while he tried with all his subtlety to evade it, knowing that eventually he would fail, and his frame be torn by a fit of terrible coughing. These paroxysms were accompanied by a murmured refrain of "Spit it out—spit it out." He began to realize that he had been ill, and the memory of his neglected work and unpaid landlady harassed him. One day, when the doctor was examining him, Michael tried to gain some information.

"You have been ill all right—yes—but you are out of

danger now. Pneumonia was the word, and you may think yourself lucky to have pulled through so well. You were badly run down." The doctor eyed his patient's wasted form, and marveled for the tenth time that such a bag of bones had been capable of resisting death. Smilingly he remembered the nurse's description of Michael's arms as "quite wee." Michael interrupted the reverie with a further question.

"When shall I be able to get out?"

"In another fortnight, if you are lucky—and obey orders, you know. Work? Lord, no! Not for some time."

"But I must work, or it's no good."

"Well, don't you worry about that. We must see how you get on. We'll have a chat about it later on." The cheery man moved off to another bed.

Day followed day, and Michael began to look forward to release. Meal-times became the most important events in the day, and he was always hankering for more solid food than he was allowed to have. His appetite grew immense. But convalescence lacked its fabled charms. The nurses started washing the patients before six o'clock in the morning, in order to complete the task in time for breakfast. Protests were frequent.

"Oh, *need* I be washed?" The appeal was agonized, as an unhappy victim was roused from his sleep to face the unpleasant reality of soap and water in his bed. Those patients who were nearly recovered from their ailments trotted about the ward helping the nurses.

Now and then the nurse would sit by Michael's bed for a short time, and talk to him. He was astonished to find how wide were her interests; she seemed able to discuss everything. As he lay looking up at her tranquil face he wondered whether she was in love, and he tried to imagine what her private life was. All the other occupants of the ward had hopes and fears as real as his own. How isolated he

was! How isolated every man! Life was a baffling thing. Every year seemed to lead him further from the hope of solution. He could imagine men becoming insane when they were face to face with life. In the end he himself would be conquered by it. How small a thing was death—merely the blank page at the end of the book. After all, perhaps there was no solution to the riddle. Was it not wiser to let things slide, and lie at peace? If only he could!

All night he lay and watched the ceiling, yellow in the glow of the turned-down lights. Sometimes the wind passed with tumult outside the windows, or rain with uncertain beat pattered on the glass. Outside the last leaves were swirling to the ground.

(II)

For some years Michael had been accustomed to consider himself a plaything of Fate, whose luck was invariably bad. In reality, it was not until he left the hospital that his luck actually did desert him. Until then, although he had suffered perhaps more than his share of reverses, something always had occurred eventually to lead him to safety. In common with most people he was apt to exaggerate the mischance of the moment, forgetting that such a thing can be seen only in retrospect in its true perspective. Fortune so seldom abandons any of her wards. Almost always she bestows a smile here, or a fleeting glance there, to keep hope in the heart. It would not be true, therefore, to say that Michael was altogether deserted by Fortune, even at this time. But he could not see his way, and stumbled blindly through the obscurity, not realizing that every step in the dark leads nearer the light.

When he returned, after his two months' absence, to a London splendid with liberty, his heart was high. The windows shone in the pale winter sunshine, and were charged with enchantment. The very houses with their

murky brickwork seemed to stand about him like friendly and protecting comrades. His feeling of elation was quickly spent, for his visits to his former patrons were fruitless. They were all very kind, and distressed to hear of his illness, but just then they really had no copying to be done—in a month perhaps. Always he had dreaded illness, and feared that if once he was thrown out of the running he would never be able to regain his position unaided, and this old conviction disheartened him. His optimism ebbed and left him dispirited and lonely; there was no one to whom he could turn for help. Strickland, he knew, would not hesitate to extend a hand to carry him over the moment's difficulty, but it would be nearly a month before Strickland could respond to a request. He dared not venture his few remaining shillings in sending a cable, that through some unexpected mischance might fail to reach its destination.

A fortnight later, Michael drifted to the Embankment with no very clear idea of his purpose in going there, except that in more prosperous days he had been accustomed to consider it the last refuge of the destitute. But it was not there that he was destined to find a temporary relief from want. One evening he entered a small eating-house, feeling that, however extravagant it might be, he must fill himself with food. It was the first time he realized fully what hunger meant. Husbanding his last pence, he had reduced his food each day until it became the merest pittance. The idea of repletion was actually painful to him. He desired passionately to eat and to drink. He did not tantalize his body with the thought of meat, for it was too fabulously improbable; but bread, soup, cake and cheese—how he would wolf them! He ordered a bowl of soup with bread; three half-pence spent in riotous living. As he sat waiting to be served, barely able to disguise his eagerness, he became aware that a man, who was sitting at the

opposite side of the table, had addressed him. Michael had learned that in conversation the pangs of hunger may partially be forgotten, and he was glad of some one to talk to. The stranger, with vicious satisfaction, dilated upon his evil fortunes.

"I'm damned well down on the rocky," he said. "This yer tea, kettle scourings as it is, and a scandal, is my last meal for Gawd 'imself only knows 'ow long. To-morrow I'm off to the wharves. I'm agoin' to — off to the 'ellish wharves."

Michael pricked up his ears at what sounded like a possible job. "The wharves?" he asked. "What do you do there?"

"You don't know? Well, all I says is, you bin lucky. It ain't more'n a month since I run down there last time. Good money you gets—sevenpence an hour, but you have to work your guts to strings, very near, and the 'unger you gets on, let alone thirst, is chronic. Only one day jobs you gets. There's too many mikeing around at the gates. Some of 'em stand on their hind legs 'alf the night waiting to be took on."

"Well, I'm down too. I wish you would take me along with you," said Michael. "Of course I don't want to get in your way, but I could stand my chance with the rest."

"Can you stand it? You don' look no blarsted Sандow; thin you are."

"I've been in hospital, but I think I'm pretty strong; at any rate, I could have a shot."

"Horspital, poor devil. It's them bleedin' 'orspitals, and what takes you there, as does the trick. That's the way I lost my job. Clurk I used to be till I broke my ankle. Gawd knows why I done it. Now they won't look at me. 'Clurk,' they says, 'sure you wasn't a Alderman?' They don' know 'ow easy it is to drop, once you loses your place." For a moment a trace of lost clerical gentility

showed through the other's coarsened manner. "You come with me," he continued. "I know a decent 'ouse where there ain't too many crawlers about. Ticks an' all, in some there is. But I'm real sorry for you; you're like me, not one of them sort." He indicated a wastrel in the gutter.

(III)

"'Ere we are, waiting for the the-atre," humorously observed Michael's guide; as, with jacket collars turned up, they stood next morning in the row of casuals at the wharf gates, vainly endeavoring with shrugged shoulders and hugging elbows to keep warmth in their unfed bodies. It was a cheerless day; rain was falling with dull insistence through the wind that swept icily down the muddy streets. Three hours of dogged waiting had won for them a position from which they could survey with contemptuous pity those who, less fortunate or less early, than themselves, formed the tail of the queue, dubious of getting a job.

Inside the gates stood a small box-office-like hut that bore out ironically the likeness to a theatre. The man who occupied it, and engaged the hands, was as doubtful of Michael's ability to work as the latter's companion had been.

"'Ee's all right. I know about 'im; a rasher but tough, is his motter," volunteered this last. This was considered sufficient, and Michael was allowed to pass in to the work, the warming properties of which made it doubly welcome.

It was seven o'clock when work began, and by five o'clock in the afternoon, when the whistle sounded, Michael would have earned four shillings in return for seven hours of work more suited to a machine than to a human being. With about twenty others, he was put on to unload a steamer laden with bananas. From the hold the crates of fruit had to be carried up a gangway, and into the warehouse, where they were stored on "Floor B." The slightly spiced smell in the warehouse, where almonds, orris-root, and fruit of

all sorts were stored, was a haven of relief after the horrible odor of stale sweat and filthy cotton that exuded from the men as they worked in the hold. Here and there in the warehouse, inspectors were examining the fruit as it was brought in, passing some, but condemning those crates in which they detected a single fruit that had become rotten.

To and fro Michael toiled; and, as the tide ebbed, the gangway, at first inclining downward from the ship, changed its position until its steep ascent increased the difficulty of staggering ashore with burdened shoulders. Unaccustomed to manual labor, and weakened by his neglected body and empty stomach, Michael worked in a state of stupor. Far off in the misty future, midday loomed, and with it the dinner hour and relief. He tried to concentrate his thoughts upon it, but its vast distance made the time seem to pass still more slowly. "I mustn't give in," he moaned to himself, almost sobbing for breath. "I must stick it—stick it." All the time, he felt that his power of endurance was rapidly approaching exhaustion. He could not conceive how he would be able to hold out; but he knew that he must. By eleven o'clock he was counting the steps from the hold to the warehouse. He fixed his eyes on the top of the gangway, and determined to reach that spot. When the distance was accomplished in safety, he carried his mind on to the possibility of reaching the doorway a dozen yards in front. He was unable to grapple with the thought of the whole distance. The hands of the clock seemed to have stopped. Every journey to and fro took two minutes; thirty more journeys to be made. His foot caught unexpectedly on a knot in the gangway; and with no reserve of energy to fall back on, he was unable to recover his balance. He fell, down—down—down. The man behind him pushed fumblingly at him with his foot, and cursed him, telling him to move out of the way. Staggering to his feet, Michael left the crate he had dropped, and tottered to the side of the

ship, retching. He felt horribly sick; if only he could vomit he would feel better, but he could not. A foreman came up and told him to get back to his work, but Michael could not pull himself together. "You better git out then," said the foreman; adding more kindly, "Tell them as I sent you, and they will give you your cash."

At the pay-office Michael received two shillings and four-pence; a sum sufficient to keep him for three days, or even more. But he knew that he was unfit for manual work, and that in future he would have to look elsewhere. Fiercely he envied those whose muscles were capable of keeping them from starvation.

His first action was to get a meal at one of the neighboring eating-houses. When he had finished eating he felt better, and started aimlessly to walk. Leaving the river, he struck northwards across the city, and then turned towards Whitechapel. Unwittingly he penetrated the Jewish quarter where Christians were rarely seen, and was surrounded by a crowd of children who shouted at him. "Yock-boy, get out," they cried, and tried to hustle him. Rather alarmed by the looks of disfavor that greeted him on all sides, he made his way back whence he had come. Back to the river he went; the river that for all its filthy environment had come from the fresh air and the green fields. Something stirred within him as he remembered that spring was at hand, and the thought of the spinnies loud with birds, and windy with wings allured him. He knew that there was hardship among the hedges as there was in the town, but he felt that it could not be so bad. Moved by a sudden impulse, he decided that he would quit London and seek fortune in the smaller towns about the country. It would do him good to walk in the purer air, and he thought that, if he was able to beg his way far enough, he might be able to obtain employment. With his new resolution hope sprang in his heart.

**BOOK III**

**Enlightenment**



## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE PRODIGAL BROTHER

(I)

BRIGHTON is a most deceptive town; the hints that it gives of its past are as little to be relied upon as those of certain of its lady visitors when they are in reminiscent mood. To a visitor who is enterprising enough to explore them, the little by-streets that lead from the Western Road appear to belong to a past when the town slept the sleep of gentle Georgian cathedral cities, untainted by the neighboring metropolis. There are strangely huddled little houses that might date from an innocent youth that touched hands with the medievals. Nevertheless, as every Londoner and many natives know, a century ago nothing except a fishing village lay at the foot of the cliffs where Brighton with her flaunting pride now stands. Evil fairies attended her christening; George of ill-repute was her sponsor, and she has never thrown off the shadow of her early influences. Brighton with all her witchery is the British Paris; she is the pleasure suburb where Londoners pursue their vices in secrecy. But who can resist the witchery of the air? the dry and sunny wind, and the dazzling sea that tumbles in white foam over the shingle? Not, at any rate, a group of young people who were passing along the front one sunny April morning, a year later than the events recorded in the last chapter, with the brisk and ecstatic walk that vouches for an early bathe behind, and a voracious appetite for a breakfast to come. The previous day had been stormy, and mists of rain had

washed the sea to the faintest and purest blue. On the fore-shore, a few figures were bending over the pebbles, searching for the small treasures that a heavy sea like that of the preceding day usually unearthed. The party on the promenade stopped to watch them, and one of the girls asked her companion what they were doing.

"I don't know much about it," he replied, "but I have an idea they are called beach-combers, or something. They rake up old sixpences and things among the stones."

"How exciting! I suppose they are always hoping to find a wonderful buried treasure. Rosie!" she called to an older girl who was behind her, "what do you say to having a shot at it?"

"Don't be a goose, Joan. I vote for breakfast; and, what's more, it wouldn't be fair."

"Oh, you dear old solemnity, as if I meant it! Come on, Nick," she called to the boy who was with her.

"Loud cheers drowned the cries of 'Rats,'" commended that gentleman grinning.

"You look like a drowned rat yourself, if that is what you mean. My dear—your hair!—if Alison could see you, she would never speak to you again."

"Look here, Joan; just because you happen to be my sister, you needn't think you bally well own the place, and can say what you like," growled her brother, turning bright red. He looked furtively at Rosie to see if she had noticed his discomposure, for he liked her and did not want to be made to look foolish when she was present. But Rosie was not looking at him. She was watching the depressing harvesters on the beach with a slightly puzzled expression. She was very deep in her thoughts, and at first did not hear Joan when the latter called to her. A second shout from the vanguard brought her to herself, and she turned to a good-looking boy with a snub nose, some years her junior, who obviously adored her.

"I want you to do me a favor, Mr. Feversham."

"Rather! of course I will," he replied with delight.

"Well, luckily for you it isn't anything very much; though you are very rash in your promises. I want you to go after the others, and leave me here. If they want to know what has happened, say I have got a stone in my shoe, and don't let them come back. It's all right—I'm not going to elope," she added, in response to his bewildered expression. "I will tell you all about it later on—perhaps."

"Of course I will; only, I say, will you do me a favor too?"

"Yes?"

"Well, I know I am rather an idiot, but I wish you wouldn't always call me Mr. Feversham: my name's Dudley, you know, and I am so pally with Nick that after all, it would be more natural, wouldn't it?" He was secretly rather pleased with this ingenious reasoning.

"Of course I will; not because you are Nick's friend, but because you are going to be my friend, too, I hope."

"I say, how awfully jolly of you!"

Dudley went off with holiday in his heart, and Rosie, as she watched him, smiled, and then, as her eyes rested on his boyishly tousled mop of sandy hair, she sighed. She waited till he was well upon his way, and then ran down an incline to the beach. She crossed the shingle, watching one of the beach-combers intently. The nearer she approached him, the more convinced she was that her suspicion was correct.

"Michael!" she half-questioned and half-asserted, calling to him.

The man straightened his back, doubtfully to regard her; his whole appearance that of a down-at-heels loafer. After a moment, recognition sprang into his eyes, wavered, and was confirmed.

"Rosie!" he cried.

"Oh, my dear old boy. I have found you. How glad I am!"

"How did you guess—Rosie—are you a witch?"

"I knew your silly old walk. I was with the others on the front, and I thought—I knew it was you, so I came."

"The others?" questioned Michael; and, remembering the figure he cut, he lost his assurance.

"Yes, the Somertons—you remember at Mineford? Joan and Nick—Anne isn't here; and Dudley Feversham, a friend of Nick's. It's all right, I sent them on and said nothing," she reassured him.

"I am so awfully glad to see you again, Rosie girl, though I know I ought to be kicked for not writing during all these years. But I fell down-stairs, as it were." He hastened to save his dignity. "Not as bad as this, you know. This is only for the moment, but I have always been hard up since Mr. Chesters stopped my allowance. My concert failed, and I had to play at a picture-show, and then I gradually sank to copying music and worse. All this summer I have been walking, first to one place and then another, trying to get jobs as pianist to pierrot-parties. I had a row with the last lot a month ago, and I haven't been able to get another job. You see, it's too late in the season." He broke off, to hark back to the past. "What ages ago it seems since we were all together, and so it is."

"Mr. Chesters died last October," said Rosie.

"Dead! Good Lord—and you know I always hoped that one day I should be able to explain."

"He was always waiting for you to come back. He would never let us try to find you, because he said that you were all right, and merely hiding yourself through obstinacy."

"It was that at first, and then it was shame at having failed."

Michael gazed at the shingle with unseeing eyes.

"And mother?" he asked, hesitating with a presentiment of what would be the answer.

"She died two years ago, old boy. I have been with Roger since then. You know her money was only an annuity—he's famous now, you know. What hundreds of things there are to tell you."

"Yes, but mother and Mr. Chesters both dead! Do you know, she doesn't seem half so real to me as he did. I suppose really we never got on very well together."

"You shouldn't say that," protested Rosie gravely.

"I know: perhaps I shouldn't, but it's true. I say, you really mustn't stand here talking to a disreputable creature like me," said Michael, realizing for the first time what a glorious morning it was, and a hundred other delightful things that had escaped his notice. Rosie must not stay, but what did that matter now? What feasts he could have!

"Don't be a goose," said Rosie, breaking in upon his soaring thoughts, "we must make plans. You must get clothes and things, of course, to begin with."

"I haven't a sou."

"Well, if you come to our rooms—no, that won't do. If you come here at nine o'clock to-night (how dreadful it sounds), I will bring you some money, and then I will tell the others."

"Not everything?" pleaded Michael.

"Yes—it will be so much better. Then, when you turn up, they will be astonished to see you looking civilized."

"All right—and now you must go. Rosie, if only you knew how I feel. Oh, for a clean bed and toast and things!"

"Cheer up: you shall have them all. And now I must fly, or they will be coming to look for me."

She regained the road, and waved encouragement, regardless of the inquisitive eyes of the few people who were about. On the beach Michael turned his face to the sea,

and its tranquil beauty calmed his racing thoughts. On the high downs behind the town Autumn stood laughing in the wind.

(II)

Two days later Michael returned to the world of his peers, that had become strange to him. The first dread of facing critical eyes, the first ecstatic awakening in the security of a dainty bedroom, passed. He was astonished to find how easily he dropped into his place: had it not been that Dudley was hungry for stories about the depths of life, Michael would have almost forgotten, within twenty-four hours, that things had ever been different. In some quiet way, Rosie had prepared every one so well for his advent that he was accepted without question. He believed, during his first period of delight, that his doubts and worries were over; he felt quiet and serene, and viewed the world with passionless eyes. Rosie was staying with the Somertons; and as a matter of course, they extended the invitation to Michael, so that the whole party, with the exception of Dudley, who was at a neighboring boarding-house, were together.

After dinner on the evening of Michael's arrival, they went out onto the front for a stroll before going to a concert at the Aquarium. It was not long before Dudley obtained possession of Rosie, who had not the heart to send him away. Soon afterwards, Nick and Anne went off to buy post-cards, and left Michael with Joan.

"They aren't very polite, to go darting off like this," said Michael to break the ice.

"I am afraid we are rather a dreadful family altogether."

"But Rosie is just as bad; it is only we who are dignified and polite."

For a moment they were silent; the sough of the sea in their ears.

"I suppose you had forgotten all about me?" asked Michael.

"Of course not," Joan protested, smiling at him.

"Hadn't you really? And yet we haven't seen each other for all these years. I little thought, when we were at Mineford, that I should meet you again here. I had just failed for a scholarship, but I'm afraid I wasn't very cut up about it," said Michael smiling at his memories.

His words brought back to Joan a crowd of incidents, and, as they talked about the days they had spent together at the sea so long ago, they forgot how superficial had been their relations. They seemed to be very old friends; and by the time they rejoined Rosie and the others, they were on a far more intimate footing than they had been at the beginning of the evening.

When they were at the concert, Michael looked at his companion with new interest, and tried to remember what she had been like when she was a little girl. At this time she was tall and rather thin; she was only moderately pretty, but there was a clear honesty in her eyes that was touching in its sincerity, and Michael decided that she was the sort of girl who would be loyal through thick and thin, when once her heart was touched. He wondered if she was in love; if so, her happy air of serenity showed that she was sure of her lover. He grew indignant at the thought of any one grieving her, and imagined himself dealing vengeance upon such a man; the next moment he smiled at himself. She was a dear girl, but why should he take her cause so much to heart? He wondered whether it was because of their old associations, or because he was always stirred by the friendship of a nice girl. Love, he reflected, for all its misty pain, was good for him; he had never been in love without his better nature becoming dominant. It is when one is lonely that one invites the devil to tea; when one is in love, happily or unhappily, the heart is too full for evil to gain entrance. He hoped he would not fall in love with Joan—it would spoil his happiness.

Michael walked home with Rosie. She was the same light-hearted and tender sister as he remembered. She was older in years, it was true, but it was impossible to believe that her heart had aged. For him, she was still eighteen. The excitement of the day had touched them both to unwonted tenderness. Michael asked about Maud, who had been in England with her husband the year before, but was now in India again, and about the other people whom he had known. He wondered why Rosie said so little about herself.

"I wonder you aren't married, Rosie," he said.

"Please don't, old boy."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you; all I meant was that you are worth all the lot put together, and if no one has discovered it they must be awful fools."

"Some people have told me so, Michael, but I didn't care for them."

"Haven't you ever run across any one you really liked, Rosie girl?"

"I did once—but please don't let's talk about it, dear; it only hurts, and it doesn't do any good, does it?"

Turning, he saw that her eyes were wet; and, as he glanced quickly away, she dabbed at them with her handkerchief. How hideous the world was! it was not right that Rosie should have had a rotten time. He ached with sympathy for her, but knowing that she would prefer it, he said nothing.

When they were saying good-night, he broached the future.

"I don't know what I shall do," he said; "of course I suppose that there is no great hurry, but I shall have a shot at something. It does one no good to idle."

"There is plenty of time to see about that," Rosie replied, "and, at any rate, Roger is sure to be able to get you a job. He is going to start a huge company, or something."

"It is funny, but I have never quite realized that Roger has done anything much. I hardly ever used to see the papers; in fact it was only by chance that I heard about his invention."

His words called up a memory of the day he spent with Isobel in Richmond Park, and he ended his day of triumph on a note of sadness.

(III)

When she had reached her bedroom, Joan slipped quickly out of her clothes; all the evening she had been looking forward to the time when she could think everything over. Even the hours she had spent with Michael himself had seemed less important than the time when she could reconstruct the events and conversations of the day. After a single peep from the window at the sea that, gleaming in the moonlight, saddened her, she slipped white and thin in her clinging night-dress across the room, and crept into bed. For a time she lay passive, while the notes of Michael's voice sounded in her ears. She heard him speaking as he had that evening; isolated phrases leaped into being once more, and then faded into silence. She was not concerned with the matter of his remarks; what he had said was of no importance, since it was impersonal, but she surrendered herself to the melody of his words. She whose heart was so simple and clean imagined herself purified by her love, for she did not attempt to disguise her state. She felt that she had always loved him, although until now she had not known it, and in his eyes she found the answer to the question why she had never really liked any one else. So many men had shown that they liked her, but somehow she had never been able to bring herself to respond; the lonely isolation of her heart had distressed her in vain. Some day she knew she would marry, but she had always pictured herself as given to a man for whom she did not care; she did not

dread it as some girls would have done, for she never brought herself to face the facts of life, but she wished to forget that it would happen. She was happy unmated; and, while still she might, she tried to pretend that she would always remain as she was. Now that Michael had returned, she saw that he supplied the key to all her life. From those early days, when as a little girl with long legs she had followed quietly in the background, until now, he had dominated her existence. The sadness of his life brought tears to her eyes, and made her bury her face still deeper in her pillow for companionship. She longed to tell him that she, at any rate, had always believed in him, and that his sufferings had not been in vain, since they had inspired her to face life with courageous eyes. His face seemed near her in the dark, and he seemed to be looking at her with the expression she loved so much; there was the faintest smile upon his lips, and in his eyes grave and tender mockery. She ached with tender longing for him, and the knowledge that he was near made her thrill with a strange emotion. With her handkerchief clutched in her hand she prayed for him; that after his long questioning he might find a peaceful haven, and that she might become more worthy of his friendship.

Sleep fell on the painted town; the moon flung long shadows across its empty streets, and to the house where Michael slept the ministering wind brought healing from the sea.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### WINDECOTE

(I)

AFTER the death of Mrs. Lawson, Roger and Rosie went to stay at a little village on the south coast. One day while they were there they went for a long rambling walk along the downs; and, in the course of it, came upon a deserted farmhouse, sheltered from the sea-winds by a clump of trees. They rested in the weed-grown garden, and ate their lunch there. Charmed with the old-world aspect of the place, Rosie suggested that they should live there. When he returned to town, Roger went to see the agents through whom the place was announced for sale; and, finding that the price was moderate, he bought it outright, giving it to Rosie as a birthday present. Under Rosie's management, Windecote Farm soon began to look very different from the dilapidated homestead it had been when they found it. The garden was filled with old-fashioned flowers, and casement curtains set off the small square panes of the windows. A cow-shed was transformed into a garage for Roger's motor when he ran down for week-ends, and, with petrol-gas and a bathroom, they were able to consider themselves thoroughly countrified and old-fashioned. Roger, the alert young scientist, was very fond of the sister, who had been his staunch ally in the disputes that had arisen from time to time while he lived at home, and now that they were independent they got on very well together.

At the time of Michael's return, Rosie had emerged from this retreat, where she spent almost all her time, in order to join the Somertons at Brighton. She declared that the

only pleasure she derived from mixing with the world was that it made her more fully able to appreciate the delights of Windecote, but she urged the Somertons to spend a few weeks there when she returned, and they readily fell in with her suggestion. In her heart she was delighted; she was far too kindly a girl to be able to enjoy her own company for very long, although she would never have admitted it; feeling that by doing so she would cast a reflection upon Roger. When Michael returned, she would have liked to spend the time quietly with him; but it was too late—the arrangements had been made already, and for his sake she was glad they had, as she soon guessed that he was feeling depressed. She hoped that the company of the Somertons would draw him from himself. She knew instinctively that he was passing through a critical period of his life, and she dreaded the consequences of allowing him to brood undisturbed.

When once they reached Windecote, Michael threw himself with keen delight into the irresponsible life that was led there. The only staid member of the party was Mrs. Somerton, who, almost bed-ridden with rheumatism, was little able to restrain the wild spirits of the young people who had spirited her off to the quiet farmhouse. Michael had not seen her until the day she left Brighton; before then she had existed for him merely as "Mother," whose wishes had to be consulted from time to time, and who lurked somewhere in the house, invisible and alone. But during the journey from Brighton, he had sat by her for a time, guessing that she must be very lonely. She had changed greatly from the comfortable and fussy woman he remembered sitting on the shore at Mineford with his mother many years before; not so very many years as old people compute them, but long enough to make or wreck a career. The death of her husband six years before had come as a great blow to her; not so much because of her affection for him, as be-

cause she felt helpless without his support. In her youth she had been one of those pretty fair-haired girls who, with all their frivolity and shallowness, powerfully attract men whose practical ability should be sufficient to make them more cautious. She was not lacking in cleverness, but her husband had been so eager to relieve her of every care and duty, that she had allowed him to do everything for her, with the result that, when she was left a widow at the age of fifty-five, she was quite unfit to look after her tempestuous family. Her sense of incapacity showed itself in querulous nagging, and for a year or two she was a very difficult woman to put up with. The rheumatism that attacked her a few years later, worked a great change in her character. For weeks at a time she was confined to her room; and, although her girls spent much of their time sitting with her, she kept many hours of vigil when, weary of reading, she lay by her window thinking. Suffering broadened and mellowed her mind: the natural ability which she had been too lazy to cultivate during her days of activity began to assert itself when she became idle through necessity, and Michael, who first came to her in sympathy, stayed from genuine interest. Before they reached the farm, he respected and admired her, while she on her side had read in his eyes the unrest that belied his laughing words.

## (II)

There was really very little to do at Windecote, and the sea, which was less than a mile from the house, played a large part in the life there. Every morning the children, to use Mrs. Somerton's phraseology, collected in the dining-room before breakfast, and after eating biscuits set off with towels round their necks for a bathe. They had a couple of tents on the beach; but, as the place was so quiet, they merely slipped mackintoshes over their underclothes, and returned to the house to finish dressing. It was several

miles to any watering-place, and the absence of houses seemed to make the water there clearer and brighter in the early morning than it was elsewhere. With planks ravaged from an old outhouse, Michael and the two boys made a raft which they anchored about a hundred yards from the shore. At first, the three swam out to it leaving Rosie and Joan by themselves; but Dudley Feversham, torn between the delight of racing Michael, and the misery of abandoning Rosie, soon gave way to the latter. Rosie in turn, pointing out how much nicer it would be if Joan could swim, persuaded Michael to teach her, so that Nick was left to caper upon the raft in solitude. He was, after all, the happiest member of the party, for Joan and Dudley were heart-sick, and Rosie was concerned at Michael's quietness.

Joan, the first to stir one morning, found that Rosie did not intend to bathe, and set out to call the others. It appeared that Nick had formed a compact to go for a walk with Dudley, whose interest in the sea began and ended with Rosie. She knocked at Michael's door with painful anxiety; and, when he called out that he was getting up, her heart leaped with a joy so intense that it made her catch her breath.

Michael was in unusually good spirits that morning, and as Joan always forgot her doubts and fears when she was actually with him, they walked across the fields to the sea with a great deal of laughter. While they were undressing, they called to each other from their tents. Joan was by now able to swim, and Michael suggested that she should make for the raft.

"Do you think I could? No, I'm sure it would be impossible," she murmured.

"Rubbish, of course you can—I will keep close to you."

"Well, you must drag me out if I drown," she replied, and then her voice became indistinct, as she put hairpins into her mouth.

In the water they got into tremendous spirits.

"Isn't it top-hole?"

"Rather!" spluttered Joan, laboriously forging along with her mouth very near the water.

"Take it easy; why don't you float?" suggested Michael, casually kicking his feet about.

"Why can't I, you mean! Oh dear! are we nearly there?"

She scrambled on to the raft with Michael's help, and once there scoffed at the terrors through which she had passed.

"It isn't so very far, after all."

"Of course it isn't."

"I shall come every day."

"But keep clear of Nick; he's a young terror, and seizes the nearest leg as if it was a rope to climb up."

"Oh, Nick! I wonder why they have gone for a walk instead of bathing."

"Rosie!"

"Yes."

They looked at each other and laughed. Joan, shining and wet, looked charming and slim. The tonic of sunshine and sea-breeze made them forget their hopes and fears. Michael felt drawn towards the girl who was looking at him with such happy eyes.

"You are a good sort, Joan."

"Am I really?"

"Yes, and you look very pretty this morning."

"Don't be silly."

"I mean you look prettier than ever."

"What compliments!"

"But you don't return them; scratch my back and I will scratch yours."

"You would be far too conceited if I did."

"Would they be so nice?"

"We shall be late —"

"Would they?"

"Perhaps—now do help me in."

When they reached the house, a motor was standing at the door; Roger had arrived unexpectedly for breakfast. Busy with the necessary preparations for his reception, Rosie did not see the meeting between the two brothers.

"That you, Michael? How are you?"

"All right, thanks—isn't it a rattling day?"

Roger, tall and dark, by the mantelpiece, lit a cigarette, and with brief, penetrating glances took stock of Michael who felt sheepish.

Breakfast was noisy, as it always was, but Michael had lost his self-confidence.

Roger possessed a far stronger character than his brother, and the latter felt that silently his qualities were being estimated. He fought shy of the most simple questions that Roger put to him, answering almost in monosyllables. He disliked Roger; there was a touch of the insolence of success in his bearing, but he knew that it was important for him to create a good impression, and he endeavored to make himself appear in a favorable light. He was not a success; whatever topic came his way seemed to die when it reached him. The others rallied him.

"You are very down in the dumps," said Rosie, giving him a moment's attention between orders and petitions that every one should eat more.

"He's in love—with Joan," suggested Nick brightly, as he balanced a large lump of marmalade on his last piece of toast.

Michael, quite undisturbed, looked across at Joan to catch her responsive smile, and discovered that she was crimson. He looked quickly away and twitted Nick with the object of his early walk, but while he was speaking his thoughts were elsewhere. He had never before thought of Joan in that light, and now he was astonished to find how charming she

was. Why had she blushed? He knew that she liked him, and he supposed that she would naturally dislike such a remark as Nick had made, when a comparative stranger was present. Roger had sat quietly noting it all, and Michael almost hated him. Why had he come just at this time, and why should he be so infernally patronizing? At any rate there was some consolation in knowing that, clever as he thought himself, he was wrong if he supposed that Nick was correct. The room seemed small and stuffy, and the chatter futile. Michael wondered how Rosie could stand it all; she who was so splendid. Yet she looked radiant. Could it be that he himself was wrong, and that such things counted and were important? that the hazy immensities he never really defined, were of less moment?

During the meal, Michael played the part of the little brother; but when he and Roger sat smoking on deck-chairs in the orchard afterwards, the latter seemed to have thrown off the reserve that had appeared so objectionable at breakfast. He questioned Michael with genuine interest about his life during the years that had elapsed since last they had met. While Michael described the ill-fortune that had attended his steps, Roger sat nodding, and only occasionally added anything to the conversation.

"What do you propose to do now?" he asked at length.

"I don't know—something certainly, although there are not many things I could do."

"You could live down here very comfortably, you know, and you would be a companion for Rosie."

"Yes, but I feel that I must do something. I am rather a pessimistic and restless beggar, and I don't think I could stick sheer slackness. Anything would be better than that."

"I think you are wise, though I often feel that I would give a good deal to clear out and spend the rest of my life in an old jacket with a pipe in my mouth, dawdling about in the sun. The idea of vegetating in some God-forsaken hole

seems like heaven—still I know I couldn't really stick it any more than you."

"I was wondering if there would be any chance of my getting a small clerical job under you, not much of course, but just enough to keep me occupied," said Michael apologetically.

"Yes, I dare say it could be managed, but, of course, you have no experience, and that makes it harder."

"I shouldn't mind a bit what it was; I would be a stamplicker, if there was nothing else to be had."

"I dare say you would, but if you didn't mind, I should. It wouldn't pay me to shove you in like that. People would say, 'Look here, that man Lawson can't have much behind him; d'you know his brother is in the show and only getting twopence a year.' These things need careful manipulation, I can tell you. Still, I will remember when I get up to town. I don't mind telling you that it's going to be a damn big thing; it's pretty large already, and I think there's going to be a big increase in our staff almost at once, so I may be able to get hold of something for you. But don't you go thinking that, because I said it wouldn't be a job as office-boy, it will be anything ravishing, because it won't."

"It's awfully good of you, considering that we are more or less strangers."

"I'm not doing it for you, dear boy, but for Rosie. You surely don't think I care a damn what happens to you? Good Lord!" Remembering the way Michael had shirked his responsibilities, Roger grew indignant.

Sitting together, the brothers made a curious contrast. Roger, massively built, with dark hair and the level mouth of a man who not only thought but acted; Michael, almost ludicrously slight, with untidy nondescript hair and a face that weakened from a broad brow and clever eyes to a mouth that betrayed his irresolute temperament. His was the face of a boy rather than a man, and of a boy who had

not yet learned to view life in the proper focus. If ever it came to a struggle between the two, Roger would be the one to try and carry the day by overwhelming confidence; but Michael, tentative and uncertain, might carry on a guerrilla warfare that would eventually win success. Roger surveyed life as if he could analyze it with unerring precision, as he did the salts in his laboratory; Michael peered closely, never knowing whether his investigation would end in an explosion or not; ever seeking truth he had the creative itch without the ability to allay it. Roger's brain and Michael's heart together might have achieved great things, but left to itself the heart could only mope.

After sitting in silence for a time, Roger leaned forward. "By the way, is there any truth in what young Somerton said about you and his sister?" he asked.

"No, nothing at all," replied Michael, feeling as if he was accused of a crime.

"Well, I'm sorry. She is a jolly girl, and would do you a lot of good. I hope you don't mind my saying so, but she would. I think you are rather at a loose-end just now, and things look a bit black, don't they?"

"Yes," murmured Michael huskily, inwardly astonished at Roger's earnestness.

"I know how you feel—I used to be like it myself, and there is only one cure, and that is to get thick with a girl—of course I don't mean anything of *that* sort—but a little mild flirtation."

"The worst of it is that I can never flirt mildly; it always becomes serious if I like a girl, or if I don't it sickens me."

"There you are! You've hit yourself off exactly. You are sick, and your complaint is taking life seriously. Believe me, old chap, it doesn't pay. It makes one feel mighty fine stuff, and all that, but here are only two essentials. Life and love, and the man who tries to strip away the tinsel with which they are covered will repent of it—they are both

so hideously ugly. It is just the tinsel that makes existence tolerable. You can't mate Truth, so shut your eyes and open your arms to the first girl who comes along, and ten to one your choice will be wiser than it would be if you spent your life searching for some paragon who probably doesn't exist."

"I don't live in a beauty show, so I am afraid your scheme won't work."

"Don't you worry; I will find some one for you, and if you waste your money on her, you may not be able to go to the theatre so much yourself, but you will soon begin to think the world a more comfortable sort of place than you do now."

"You are a very original doctor, Roger, but your diagnosis is wrong. Don't you realize that if I could do this now, I would have done it long ago. I tell you I can't fool. I suppose my sense of humor is deficient."

"You will find it all right when the time comes."

They lapsed again into silence, and Roger, thinking that it would be a good thing if his remarks were given time to sink in, made no attempt to break it. Michael, on his side, was not considering the gist of the conversation so much as the impulse that prompted his brother to say what he had. On the whole he was inclined to resent the familiarity; no doubt Roger meant well, but he couldn't understand. The successful inventor posing as a specialist for the correction of wayward emotions seemed rather ridiculous. Michael turned to look at his brother, who was leaning back with closed eyes and a blissful expression on his face. "What damned fools we all are," he thought. "But, after all, it is probably he who has the most sense, and I who am futile. Why can't I let things slide, and enjoy myself as he does?"

Disturbances in the distance heralded the arrival of Nick, big with ideas.

"Look here, you chaps, what do you say to carting our things down to the beach to-morrow and living the simple

life in bathing togs? It is the latest dodge—sunbaths, and all that, you know."

Meditation was banished, and action took the boards.

(III)

The departure of Roger for London next morning left the house strangely quiet. Spending most of his time lounging in a deck-chair, he had not noticeably added to its gaiety, but the departure of a guest always leaves those who remain in an unsettled state for the time being. It brings home the fact that at some not very distant day every one else will be leaving too. The Somertons had absorbed Rosie and Michael so readily that they had come to regard them almost as members of the family, and the realization of the fact that before long they would be separated came as a shock. Dudley Feversham lost his appetite at breakfast, and gazed at Rosie with hopeless eyes. She had met his tentative advances with a friendliness so disarming that he despaired of winning her love. For a few hours the house was silent, and all its inhabitants retired into their shells to think. By lunch-time, however, plans for the future were being revolved, and tea was as volcanic as if nothing had happened.

For a time Michael had nothing to do, except to live at his ease at the farm until he heard from Roger. The life was pleasant, but something seemed lacking, and he suffered from periods of depression, when his idleness seemed a penance. Finding it difficult to fall in with the boisterous mood of his companions, he began gradually to shut himself from them with a fence of reserve. In the mornings he would set out with a packet of sandwiches and some fruit, to spend the whole day walking along the downs, or pottering idly by the sea. More often than not, when he had traveled a few miles, he would throw himself down on the turf in the sunshine, and remain there for several hours gazing with unsee-

ing eyes at the bright sea far beneath, while his thoughts traveled through the melancholy tracts of the future.

It was not long before a letter came from Roger, saying that he hoped to find a position for Michael, and telling him to come up to London next day, in order that he might be inspected with a view to his appointment. Chaos at once ensued. Joan wept, when she was alone in her room, tears of grief at his departure, mingled with joy at his success. Nick, in the solitude of the bathroom, asked the towel-horse who the devil he should bathe with in the future, and Dudley was dismal at the idea of losing one who, knowing nothing, was nevertheless ready always to extend unspoken sympathy to his sorrowing heart. Even Mrs. Somerton felt the upheaval, and asked that Michael should go up to her room to say good-bye the evening before he left.

When he was seated by the sofa upon which she lay, she looked out of the window, and for a time was silent.

"I didn't ask you to come here merely to say good-bye," she said at length. "I wanted to speak more seriously. You have been feeling rather depressed of late, is that not so?"

"I think I must have been, as you are the second person to tell me so."

"I do not want you to joke," she answered, rebuking him, "but I have been watching you, and I thought that you were feeling sad, although you always tried to hide it. Tell me, is it that you are in love with some one? You will forgive my asking, won't you?"

"Of course I will. I think it awfully good of you to bother about me, but I'm not in love, although I've been feeling rather down lately, as you say. I have always been rather a gloomy sort of person; I expect it's my liver."

"No, no. I want you to tell me what it is that grieves you."

Michael sat staring at the setting sun that flooded the

room with burning light. "Somehow everything seems so useless," he said, wrinkling his brows as if to see some distant objects more clearly. "I can't see what things are driving at. I feel restless and pent up; it seems to me that somewhere just round the corner there is an answer to everything; and that, if I could reach it, I should find happiness, but I always seem to end up where I start; and yet always there is something that urges me on, and makes me puzzle over it all. Try as I will, I cannot see that life is worth the candle; there seems to be so much sorrow, and so little happiness. I feel fed up with my lot; it is not that I have anything to complain of—in fact I am luckier now than I have ever been before, and I have enjoyed being here. And yet it all seems so useless."

"I think I know what is wrong with you," she said; "you are in love with life, and like a silly girl it has jilted you. You have no guiding principles by which to live, and we humans are such weak creatures that we need to pin our faith upon something, no matter how foolish or mistaken, and follow blindly where it leads. You have made the great mistake of trying to face your future alone and unaided, but you cannot do that, and as long as you persist you will be vexed and miserable. It sounds very wicked, but I do believe that it is true when I say that what you must do is to make for yourself a god. Never mind whether you become 'saved' in the conventional way; whether it is a hobby by which you become engrossed, or a girl with whom you fall in love, so long as you give your whole heart to it. If you fall in love, do so as we used to do when I was a girl. Then, young men seemed to be more constant than they are now, when love has become little more than a pastime. You are good-looking and I think your heart is right; so that you shouldn't find it difficult to make a girl fond of you. Never mind who she is; if she is a good girl, give her your whole heart. Then you will be happy. It

may sound strange to you to hear an old woman talk to you like this, but I hate to see you wasting what should be the happiest years of your life. We must say good-bye now, but don't forget what I have said; and God bless you," she murmured, as he rose to leave her.

## (IV)

Rosie, who had long ago discovered Joan's secret without saying anything, arranged that Joan should drive Michael to the station when he left for London. Windecote was seven miles from the railway, and Joan looked forward to the expedition as one of the great events of her life. The whole party, with the exception of Mrs. Somerton, assembled at the door to see them drive off, and a great deal of time was spent in reiterated good-byes.

"Well, I suppose I'm in for it now, so I must do my best to get the job," said Michael, as they swung clear of the drive.

"Of course you will," replied Joan with conviction, "and you must let us know directly it is settled."

"Rather! I will wire, but you know I hardly think I shall pull it off. I have managed to be a failure all along the line, and now I am getting rather old to become a success all of a sudden."

"You mustn't say that, Michael; why, you aren't very much older than I am, and I am only twenty-one."

"But I am rather old for starting a new job, all the same," retorted Michael, secretly touched by her candid avowal of her age. "Fancy your being twenty-one; it seems only the other day that you were running about in short skirts."

"And you were far too grand to speak to me."

"Steady on, it was you who were so elusive that I couldn't have spoken if I tried."

"But you didn't," she mocked.

At the station they had twenty minutes to wait, and

Michael tried to persuade her to drive off at once. He was glad when she refused, and thought what a nice girl she was; she looked so fresh and dainty.

"I shall feel rather lonely when I get up to town, after being down here," he said.

"We shall miss you awfully."

"Will you miss me, too?"

"Of course I shall—don't be silly."

"Much?"

"A very great deal."

"Well, will you write to cheer me up?"

"Yes, of course I will—I should love to—but you must write first."

"Why?"

"I shouldn't know what to say, or how to say it."

"I may call you Joan, of course?" She nodded. "And I may write as if we were good friends?" She nodded again. "Because, Joan dear, you are the best friend I have now."

She flashed a grateful glance at him, and stored in her memory the delicious fact that he had called her dear.

"Good-bye," he said, as the train was about to start.

"Good-bye, Michael."

"Michael what?"

She winced with sudden shyness.

"Good-bye, Michael dear," she murmured, blushing. He seemed suddenly to have a great many things to say, but the train was inexorable, and bore him, still inarticulate, from the station. Leaning from the window he saw Joan, white and slim, standing waving her hand. "What a dear girl she is," he said to himself, wondering why he had only discovered the fact at the last moment. It was just his luck.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### PRACTICAL ELECTRICITY

(I)

MICHAEL drove straight from the station to Roger's flat in Knightsbridge, where it had been arranged that he should stay. The next day he was officially approved, and told that his work would begin on the following Monday. During the days that elapsed before he took over his duties, he had very little with which to occupy himself, and, after idling through town, he usually returned to the flat, high up above the traffic, and, in the luminous autumn evenings, sat gazing across the park that mocked the country he had left. Too idle to switch on the light, he would lay down his book when he could no longer see to read it, and allow his mind to wander through the last few weeks. Paradoxically enough, he realized his good fortune better now that he was in London, and about to begin work, than he had during the jolly days at Windecote. He felt that his former doubts had been due to a fear lest the good fortune which had befallen him so unexpectedly might as suddenly be withdrawn. The life that awaited him in his new occupation gave him something to which he might look forward—a definite horizon to the future, which prevented him feeling despondent, as he had when nothing had been settled. Frequently he thought about Joan, and wondered if it had been love that had entered his heart when they were parting. Never before had he been in a position to regard love as having a definite end in marriage. He had always been conscious of the fact that,

whatever he might wish, a parting would come some day—not too soon, but before there was any danger of spoiling the girl's chances. He had fallen in love carelessly, and without hesitation. Now it was a more serious matter. He was very fond of Joan—of that he was certain—but would they suit each other? He did not think that she possessed the sense of the whimsical that Isobel had made him consider one of the most desirable qualities in a girl. He was not sure that their tastes in other directions were similar. She sang, and played the piano, but what most appealed to her were drawing-room ballads and musical comedies, and they were not music as he understood it. All the same, there was something about her, a tranquil tenderness, and a suggestion of unfaltering loyalty, the thought of which was beautiful to him. She seemed a quiet haven of security, and, although he felt no passionate longing for her, he was sure that no other girl had appealed to him in quite the same way as she did.

He counted his assets, and found that he had gained a great deal more than financial independence. He had formed half a dozen friendships that he felt would not easily be broken. He had liked every member of the party at Windecote, and he determined that it would not be his fault if he lost touch with them. Roger had offered to introduce him to as many people as he wanted to know, but, for all his hunger for companionship, his shyness, increased by his isolation, made him dread meeting strangers, and he suggested that nothing should be done until he settled down. He wanted even to leave the flat, where he could not avoid coming into contact with his brother's friends, but in that he was not successful. Roger, who quickly had taken the measure of Michael's character, and saw how easily the latter would slip back into a morbid frame of mind, if he was left to himself, good-naturedly determined to keep him up to the mark. When it came to the point, Michael, who usu-

ally got on well with people, enjoyed meeting the men who dropped in from time to time during the evening. They were almost all interesting to talk to, for Roger, who detested weak natures, had collected round him a clique of his contemporaries, all of whom possessed ability. The conversation on these occasions ranged many fields of modern life: science, art, and literature passed in review, and Michael found that he had lost his interest in his old friends the Decadents. Their work seemed cloying and unsatisfying, and he hungered for something that was more wholesome. Finding that his knowledge for books was out of date, he joined Mudie's, and began to devote his evenings to reading.

After the first week, the greater part of Michael's days were spent at the office, where he worked as a secretarial assistant to the Managing-Director. The affairs of the Company, which were still in a disorganized state, needed a lot of attention, and Michael found that he had plenty to do. At first, he despaired ever of mastering the details of business life, all of which were unfamiliar to him. His first attempt to dictate letters, for example, ended in disaster. Without a pen in his hand he found himself bereft of the power of expression; for a time he floundered on, struggling with the jargon in which the letters had to be written, which was in itself an additional difficulty. Half-way through the second letter, his mind suddenly became a blank. He stared out of the window, trying in vain to form the phrases he required, and anxious to avoid betraying his rawness to the typist. His efforts were fruitless, and he was forced to finish the letters himself; sending the completed drafts to be typewritten. Sometimes when he left the office he felt that the difficulties were insuperable; and that, sooner or later, he would make a disastrous slip that could not be concealed. But, by degrees, the work began to interest him, and he picked up the threads of his duties. The work itself was

well suited to him. It gave ample scope for initiative, but at the same time he was under the supervision of some one else, and so was compelled to keep his nose to the scent. He had plenty of ability, and, when the first strangeness of his work wore off, showed considerable aptitude, but as yet he had not developed sufficient powers of concentration to enable him unguided to make the most of it.

He arrived home in the evenings tired out, and seldom felt fit for anything except a book and a pipe before going to bed; but he never seriously regretted the step he had taken, and after a night's rest started off each morning with a delightful sense of anticipation. As time passed, his appetite for work increased; the more there was of it, the better he was pleased. He felt confidence in himself, and the pleasure of surmounting difficulties awoke in him the lust of battle. He had no time to spend in idle thought, so that he lost his old feeling of depression. Everything dwindled beside the astonishing discovery that he had good stuff in him, and could be as useful as other people.

Roger, who was kept informed of Michael's progress by Mr. Collingwood, the Managing-Director, was genuinely delighted at the success of his arrangement. Secretly he had rather despised his brother's tentative nature, and his scorn had shown itself in the patronizing elder-brotherly air that had been so galling to its object. Now he began to realize that his estimate had been unjust, and he regarded Michael with more friendly eyes, guessing that one day he might prove useful. The relations between the two brothers improved as the winter advanced. When Michael first came to town, he and Roger had been strangers in everything except name; and, in the most favorable circumstances, some time must have elapsed before they became intimate. Roger's slightly hostile attitude had made progress slow, especially as Michael was too reserved to make any advances himself; but Time, the father of miracles, showing Michael

in a more favorable aspect, caused them gradually to draw together. By the end of October, they were on the footing of average brothers, and December found them united by a bond of more than ordinary friendship. It was greatly due to Roger's help that Michael mastered his difficulties as quickly as he did; at the same time he was able first to appreciate fully his elder brother's wide abilities.

The Lawson system of wireless lighting began to make definite strides as a practical proposition. The cheapness of installing it, the safety and convenience to be found in its use, were too great to be disregarded, and before long the newspapers ceased to report its adoption as a curious phenomenon. Roger was indefatigable, and spent many hours lecturing to this or that body of engineers. He pointed out that existing Electric Companies had no reason to regard it as a rival, for their power-stations could be adapted with comparative ease to meet its requirements. When one of the more important provincial corporations resolved officially to adopt the new lighting, the day was as good as won. Orders poured in, and the pressure of work became extreme. Occupied as he was chiefly with the work of organization, Michael found his duties increasing every day, and it was not long before he was promoted to the dignity of having several assistants at work under him. The time sped so rapidly that he could scarcely believe it when Mr. Collingwood referred to an imminent Christmas.

"I dare say you will be glad of a rest," he said, eyeing his alert and business-like junior with satisfaction.

"Yes, in a way, but still, I should like to see things a bit more settled first," replied Michael dubiously.

"I am afraid that is rather a chimerical wish. It will be a long time before we get really ship-shape. It can't be done. I think we have coped with the rush as well as was possible; but, with business expanding as it is now, it would take Old Nick himself to keep things in line."

"Well, I suppose I had better slip out for some lunch," said Michael, reaching for his hat.

"Don't try and overdo it, Lawson. It has been a great blessing to have some one capable at hand, but you can't do everything, you know—you will only knock yourself up," the manager warned him.

"In a fortnight I shall have plenty of rest, sir, and I think I can stick it till then all right," replied Michael smiling.

He opened the door, and ran down-stairs, absurdly elated. Mr. Collingwood was not easily pleased, and the praise he had just given was a great feather in Michael's cap. It was the more welcome, since he had received more kicks than half-pence during his life.

Left to himself, Mr. Collingwood stood for a moment cogitating, "To think he was a musical beggar," he said to himself, "well, I'm damned!" To his eminently practical mind, music was synonymous with long hair and hopeless inefficiency. In a moment, he started from his reflections, and bustled out of the room.

## (II)

A few days later Roger, who allowed no sentiment to interfere with what he considered the realities of life, sailed for the United States in order to superintend in person the installation of his system in that country; where, after some scepticism, a great enthusiasm for it had sprung up. Michael, therefore, spent Christmas alone with Rosie. For all her vehement protestations to the contrary, it is probable that she was not sorry that her elder brother was absent. He would have despised the happy solemnity with which she kept the festival, but Michael, who held a place very near the centre of her heart, entered into the spirit of the thing with unaffected childishness. For the time, indeed, they

threw off the restraint of maturity, and were a couple of children setting out with eager delight upon the great adventures of draping the pictures with holly, and hanging upon the miniature Christmas-tree little brown-paper packages, over the contents of which Rosie was mystery itself. Although they were alone, there was a Christmas dinner that was ushered with full honors. They pulled crackers, and ached with laughing over the mottoes they contained. The tree with its staggering colored candles held the centre of the table: and, when at length the time came for its treasures to be revealed, the maids were called in, and Rosie laughed so much over the absurdities she had hidden in the little packages that dangled from the branches, that she could scarcely cut the strings that held them, and sat, weak with laughter and protest, upon the edge of the table among the glasses and fruit. But after all was over, they fell into a more serious mood.

"We ought to tell ghost stories, really," said Rosie, "but it's very comfy, isn't it?" They were sitting before the fire, the glow of which was the only light in the room. Upon the bars of the grate a row of chestnuts was roasting, turned gingerly from time to time by the tip of Rosie's shoe.

"Let's just sit and gossip," murmured Michael, wriggling deeper into his easy-chair.

"You do really like your work, don't you?" asked Rosie, regarding the chestnuts critically with her head on one side. She never had been quite able to picture Michael as a city man.

"Oh, yes. There is nothing like it," he replied emphatically.

"I am so awfully glad, dear, and have you been feeling less depressed? I dreaded your going up to town; you were so awfully down when you left here in the summer."

"I can say honestly that I haven't felt like that since—I

don't know when. You see, there's such a dickens of a lot to do, that you don't have time to say 'how do I feel?'—you just forge ahead."

"How splendid! How I wish you had never gone in for that stupid music."

"I'm not a bit sorry I did; although now it all seems hazy and far away. Do you know, I have hardly touched a piano for weeks, and I haven't wanted to. I don't think I told you that before I left here Mrs. Somerton advised me to fall in love—no; don't smile—I'm quite serious, and so was she. She spotted that I was feeling fed up, I suppose, and she told me that was the cure. I have never forgotten how it touched me; it makes a lump come in my throat to think of it."

"She is a dear—but you have found another way."

"Yes, I have, and, you know, once I thought that all this sort of thing—work I mean—was unimportant and degrading. What a fool I was," said Michael, smiling back disdainfully across six months. "And yet, perhaps I was partly right in a way. Life is a more important thing than we think, but if you look at it too closely and try to analyze it, it maddens you. The fact is that we are too weak to resist something that impels us forward; and, when we try to look back at what is driving us on, we are punished as I was. This is no world for questioning and abstractions; to be happy you must be a fanatic; never mind whether it is love, or frivolity, or work, you must aim at something. It is like a boat-race, in which the cox has to keep his eyes glued on a point in front, and if his attention wanders the whole boat goes to the dickens. I think the fault of the present day is to be too introspective; too much taken up with dissecting each messy little inch instead of going for broad facts. After all, every great State was built upon principles, and came a mucker when people retired into holes and said they were superior beings. Thank the Lord, I

have grown wiser, and wisdom consists in action, not in thought."

Then, feeling that perhaps he had been unduly serious, Michael harked back.

"When you come to think of it, she was rather rash to advise me to fall in love."

"By the way, have you seen Joan lately?" asked Rosie.

"No, not since I was here," he replied, eyeing her suspiciously. But she appeared to be quite innocent of any hidden motive in her question; and, feeling that the time was not ripe for him to disclose his feelings regarding Joan, he moved to the piano. He did not play anything that claimed to be serious, but the popular tunes of the moment that he thought would appeal to Rosie. He was moved by them himself; time and place conspired to make the sentimental and dreamy melodies seem poignant with meaning. Sitting by the fire with her cheek against her hand, a great sadness stole over Rosie; and, for the moment, even the joy of Michael's new-found happiness could not compensate her for what she saw through the tears that gathered to her eyes.

### (III)

Michael returned to town with appetite for work unabated. He felt sure that at last he had found his vocation, and his conviction proved it. As business increased, Mr. Collingwood began to leave more and more in Michael's hands, and the work that came to him thus was of great interest. It became part of his duty to see many of the more important callers who streamed into the office every day to make inquiries, and he discovered that human nature was tremendously interesting. He did not trouble himself with ethical considerations, but the wide variety of his visitors and their individualities proved a fund of amusement. Now and then, some one more technical in his knowledge

than the rest would discuss details that Michael did not understand, but he thoroughly enjoyed bluffing such callers into the belief that he knew more than he did. He was not long in finding out how easy it is to lead people away on side issues, and how uncritical they are if their own views are repeated with seeming sincerity. He proved, in fact, that he possessed the resource and tact necessary for personal interviews.

When the manager had set the seal of his approval on Michael, the other members of the staff were not slow to imitate him, and Michael began to be regarded as a man who would rise. It must not be supposed that he suffered no checks; now and then things would not go right, and one mistake followed another, until he thought that he would never get straight again. At such times he lost his optimism, and fell into abysmal gloom. At length the difficulty would be overcome, and a week later he would have forgotten that it ever existed.

One result of Michael's advance into favor with his chief was that a good many men in the office, realizing that it would be good policy, went out of their way to be nice to him. He found that, where formerly a man would have wished him a brief good-morning, he now stopped for a short chat, or proposed that they should have lunch together. Michael, who was far from guessing the real motive of these overtures, concluded that they were the natural result of his ceasing to be, as it were, a freshman. He did not respond to them very readily, however; and, whenever it was possible to do so without being openly uncivil, he avoided them. Although he had overcome his old shyness to a great extent he was still reserved, except when business demanded that he should not be so, and his natural inclination to avoid people was increased when he discovered how very few men really interested him. He could not bring himself to take pleasure in tattling with strangers without

purpose, and there seemed to be scarcely any people who were like him in that respect. When, on one or two occasions, he accepted invitations to spend evenings in the chambers of one or other of his acquaintances, he found that after the first hour or so he felt horribly bored, and that when he left, it was with a feeling of having escaped from confinement.

Early in the new year he saw in the paper that Strickland was going to give a concert of his compositions at Queen's Hall. At the sight of his old friend's name, he was lost in astonishment at the ease with which he had forgotten him during the time that had elapsed since their last meeting. Filled with remorse for what he felt to have been ingratitude, he wrote to Strickland through the latter's agent; and, a week later, he found himself once more shaking his friend's hand.

The tour in the States that Strickland had undertaken the year Michael was in Brussels was a success, both artistically and financially, and on his return he decided to make his base at Mrs. Strickland's house in Warwickshire. There he did most of his composing; spending whole months at a time cut off from all his friends. He had, however, a flat in town that he used during the frequent visits he had to make in order to attend rehearsals, or interview his agent. He had changed not less than his circumstances, and the coarsening of his features that had been first noticeable after his early success had become so pronounced that Michael, as he shook his hand, experienced a feeling that amounted almost to repulsion. Four years had altered Strickland almost beyond recognition; the rather careless and indefinite boy had grown into a gross and flabby man, who was dressed with extravagant affectation.

"It is excellent to find that you have risen from the ashes like this, Lawson; I was uncommonly pleased to hear it. What a couple of raw fools we were once upon a time to be

sure," he said, giving unusual prominence to the sibilants, while they were having dinner.

Michael laughed assent, but in reality he was offended by the other's attitude. He could not bring himself to believe that his former struggles had been foolish; he regarded them more as the perilous seas through which he had reached a haven. During the first year of their friendship he had tasted raw life, and the bitter flavor of it still lingered in his mouth.

"What was it you said you were doing?" asked Strickland during a pause.

"Wireless Lighting—you must have heard of the Lawson Light? my brother invented it, you know."

"Really? how very interesting."

"Yes, it is," replied Michael shortly, feeling chilled by the other's ill-concealed lack of interest. "I suppose you are still composing as much as you used to?"

"Oh, yes. I hope I have another ten years, or more, of original work left in me."

"How have things been going?"

"Do you mean to say you haven't heard?" asked Strickland incredulous.

"I never hear anything about music nowadays. I have given up all that."

"You, a Philistine! My dear chap, it has been colossal. I have been simply raking in the cash, and the kudos too, thank the Lord. They say I am the first man who has written really popular music that is good stuff, too. I have a weakness for pot-boilers, but I think I kept true to my ideals —more or less."

The other's candid avowal pleased Michael better than anything else during the evening; and, for a moment, he hoped that after all they might again fall into sympathy with each other. But Strickland's affectation, his self-important bearing, and his attitude of kindly patronage irritated

Michael more and more; until at last he rose to leave, fearing that, if he did not do so, he might say something that he would afterwards regret.

Strickland came to the door with him.

"Have a cigar?" he asked, proffering his case.

"No, thanks, I stick to a pipe."

"Well, you must come again soon."

"Rather!" answered Michael with simulated enthusiasm. But as he turned the corner of the street, he murmured to himself, "That's done with," and, mentally, he tore a page from his life. He knew that he and Strickland would never meet again other than as chance acquaintances.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

(I)

Love is soon taught to dance attendance on an empty mind; when work comes in at the window love will hide behind the door. One point of difference between the sexes is that women find it hard to realize that love can remain in a dormant state; for it is they who blindfold love to hide from it the harshness of reality. When once a woman is thoroughly infected with passion, it dominates her so completely that she can think of nothing else until it is sated. But a man is capable of shelving his affections while he attends to other matters. It is undeniable that a man is often incapable of such deep devotion as a woman, but it is a mistake to suppose that, because he is able to banish love to the background of his mind when circumstances demand it, his affection is dead. If women could understand this, half their sorrows would be ended.

Absorbed by his work, Michael placed Joan upon one side for a moment, but he had not forgotten her. Unfelt by him, the memory of her was leavening his heart. She kept her promise to write, and they slipped into the habit of corresponding regularly. Joan, who had more time at her disposal, and more inclination for the task, wrote longer letters; but Michael managed to send her a line every week. Their letters held no words of love: beginning "dear" they ended "affectionately"; but Joan treasured those she received with miserly care, and Michael grew to value hers; to feel glad when he saw one, or disappointed when one that

was expected failed to arrive. To outward seeming they were great friends and no more, but unconsciously Michael was still revolving matters in his mind. He was not passionately in love; indeed he did not know that he was in love at all, but there was no harm in that: a bright blaze is soon spent but a banked fire outlasts the night. This unusual calmness was not so much the result of his changed character, as of circumstance. Had he remained at Windecote for a week after their conversation at the station, in all probability he would have been unable to refrain from going further. His love of experiment, and his dislike of a suspicion of defeat, would have egged him on to conquest; and, had she known it, Joan had cause to be thankful that the train bore him away from her and so prevented his indulging in a volatile flirtation. Nevertheless, signs of the change that had come over him were not absent. Had he been corresponding with a girl two years before, the sight of "dear" at the head of a letter would have made him ache to see it transformed into "dearest," and in turn to "darling." Now that his surplus emotions were finding an outlet in his work, he was able to be more balanced in his mind, and the friendly letters gladdened him, without creating a wish for further intimacy.

It was not until February, five months after their parting, that Michael and Joan met again. Until then she had only passed through London on her way to dances in the country, and as she always arrived in the daytime Michael had been unable to see her. But at that time she came up to stay for a few days with an aunt, who had a house on Putney Hill, and she made elaborate arrangements to see him. Neither of them liked the idea of meeting at dinner at Putney; Michael because of his objection to, and fear of, social functions; Joan because she wished that they might be on a more intimate footing than could be possible in her aunt's house. A suggestion that they should have lunch together in town

was vetoed by Michael, who pleaded his work; knowing that, while he had become wise in the world, he had not become versed in the world's customs. He felt that he would not be able successfully to preside at a luncheon with its attendant ceremonies. For the first time he regretted that he had so seldom taken advantage of Roger's proffered introductions, and he resolved to do so more often in future; there were so many things to learn. Eventually, the program resolved itself into a matinée with a pendant tea.

When they met, Michael eyed Joan critically, and endeavored to appraise her appearance. She noticed his air of concentration.

"Whatever is the matter? Have I left some of my clothes behind?" she asked in laughing dismay.

"No, I was thinking how nice you looked," he replied truthfully enough.

During the performance they seemed very near together. The artificial light, the heavy air, and atmosphere of tension stirred Michael, and his excitement was betrayed by a dull flush. He spoke in low tones and his words seemed charged with more than their ordinary meaning. Looking very pretty in a white silk blouse, Joan leaned slightly towards him; and, probing the depths of her eyes, he found her spirit looking from them, wise, innocent, and shy. Some eyes were hard with a bright clarity, but these an indefinite expression rendered profound. Neither paid much attention to the piece that was being acted, for they were too full of themselves. Joan spoke little, and scarcely heard Michael's wise observations, but she was deeply happy with a joy that accepted the delight of the moment without analyzing it. To be with Michael, to sit by his side undisturbed, was in itself an experience so delicious that nothing else seemed necessary.

After tea they drove back to Putney in a taxi; and, as the lights flashed by, Michael saw Joan's face dimly as he leaned

back against the cushions. It seemed sunk in a repose that was disturbed neither by worry, nor desire, and he let his eyes rest upon it; until, feeling that she was being watched, she turned to smile at him. They talked idly, both conscious of the parting that was before them. For a moment he felt an intense desire to take Joan in his arms and kiss her, but he overcame the impulse, not merely because his passion was not sufficiently ardent to override his discretion, but because he dreaded the idea of doing anything that might grieve her. He was sure that their friendship was one of the best things that had befallen him, and he dared not risk persuading her to be more fond of him when his own feeling might prove transitory. He guessed that, if once she yielded her heart, it would not be with the experimental and tentative attitude of some girls, but without reserve and finally. The thought of the wound that any hesitation on his part would give her, made him wince. At all costs she must be shielded from himself. This attitude of his made him unusually reserved, and when he spoke, it was with a detached coldness that he did not feel.

"I shan't see you again before you leave town, I suppose," he said.

"I'm afraid not—we are going out all day to-morrow in the car, and on Monday morning I'm off to Maidstone, as you know."

"Will there be a large party there?" he asked, slightly jealous of the men she might meet.

"I expect so; a good many people I know will be there."

"Any men you know?" he asked, immediately afterwards regretting it.

"Yes: but only acquaintances, not friends like you," said Joan, guessing the reply for which he hoped.

"So I am a friend of yours?"

"Of course—how silly you are!"

"One of the best?"

"The very best," said Joan looking out of the window, and feeling very much inclined to cry.

Michael was as pleased as Punch. "I wonder —" he began, and then stopped.

"What do you wonder?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me."

"No—and here we are," said Michael, as the taxi drew up before the house.

"I think you are simply hateful," complained Joan, with a smile that betrayed her words.

"Oh, I know, we both hate each other like poison."

They said good-bye with the driver for audience. Shaking hands was a rite, mysterious and inspiring. As he drove away, Michael, looking from the window, saw Joan turn for a last glance as the door of the house opened. He lit a cigarette and settled himself to think; but, try as he would, he could not help dwelling upon trivial details of the afternoon that were of little use in solving the problem with which he was confronted.

## (II)

Sponsored by Roger, whose patience seemed to know no bounds, Michael soon after this made his appearance in society. When once he overcame his dislike of confessing how little he knew of the canons and convention he was soon able to gain all the knowledge he required. He found no difficulty in obtaining as many invitations as he wanted; and, as he gained confidence, he began to enjoy himself where he went. It was very pleasant to be able to stand in a drawing-room without feeling that his clothes were badly made, and that his bearing was clumsy. It was exhilarating to feel that he was free of good company and that he created a favorable impression. With Roger and two good-natured friends he learned to take a hand at bridge creditably, and he

was always ready to play the piano when called upon to do so. He found, therefore, that instead of having to seek invitations, they came to him too freely. He enjoyed going about, but only in moderation; for he still liked to spend a good many of his evenings quietly with a pipe and a book; to sit at dusk watching the first signs of spring in the quiet park; and, when darkness came, to draw a chair to the fire, conscious that a good day's work lay behind him.

He had not overcome his lack of interest in small talk, and his feeling that time spent on it was virtually wasted, prevented his making a good conversationalist, as the word is now understood. He met a large number of pleasant people, none of whom greatly interested him. The companions of an evening seemed like the figures of a puppet-show that would be packed up in a few hours and moved to another pitch. Many of the girls he met were pretty, but he saw too little of them to feel more than a transient admiration for them. His work, which prevented him getting about during the day, helped to foster this attitude, for he never saw the fulfilment of the plans he heard bruited. The world in which he moved was more suited for the formation of acquaintances than friendship. Friendships cannot be forced like early fruits, they ripen only during long hours of un-hurried work or leisure; they are the monopoly of dawdlers.

At times Michael questioned the value of his mode of living. He wondered whether his contentment would be permanent or whether, when the novelty wore off, he would regard things as he had previously. It seemed to him that the change which had come over him during the last six months had been too sudden and unexpected to be lasting. The fact that he would never again be in actual want was indubitable, but he dreaded lest the old hunger of spirit should again come upon him. These moments of introspection became increasingly rare as time passed. In golf he found a game with which his deficient physique did not

greatly interfere ; he was not a brilliant player, but the practice he gained during week-ends enabled him to play without bringing discredit upon himself. He never joined Roger when the latter spent the week-end at Windecote, for he preferred to keep in touch with London. His dislike of moving from one place to another was one of the traits of his old life that clung to him. He was rapidly becoming ordinary, but had any one told him so he would have still resented it.

## CHAPTER XXX

### A NEW MATCH

(I)

DURING May, Fortune put Michael through a severe test which might have undone the winter's work, had he been rooted less securely in his new surroundings. Not long after the season opened, Roger had a box given him for the opera, and, remembering Michael's old love of music, he suggested that they should go together. They were not yet on a sufficiently intimate footing for Michael to be able to refuse such a suggestion without giving a reason, and as he did not feel inclined to do that he accepted; but he was not altogether pleased with it. He had been careful to avoid music as far as possible since coming to town, for he feared the effect it might have upon him. Left to himself, he did not feel the want of it, but he could not estimate his strength and feared that, if once he gave way, he might be drawn back into the hopes and fears of the life from which he had escaped. Until now it had not been difficult to avoid going to concerts, for neither Roger nor his friends were musical, but on this occasion he felt constrained to yield, fearing that a refusal would offend Roger, who obviously was prompted by a good-natured impulse. Like a bad sailor whose fear of the sea renders him more susceptible to its vagaries, he made himself uneasy by forecasting the result of this expedition, and when the evening came he had difficulty in disguising his state of nervous excitement.

The box was in the second tier; and Roger, whose recent

career had made him familiar with many people, pointed out the celebrities who were in the house. Glancing at his program, Michael was arrested by the composer of the evening's opera, Clarence Potts. Force of habit had made him avoid the announcement in his newspaper, so that he had known nothing about the work except its name, *The Cyprian Queen*, which Roger had told him. The name of Clarence Potts brought with it a flood of memories that both pained and amused him. He experienced a faint pang of envy as he realized the progress that Potts must have made in order that the Opera Syndicate should have accepted a work from his pen. The mere fact that the opera was to be produced, showed that it was expected to be popular enough to pay; the craze for the exotic must indeed have become a genuine furore. On the point of voicing his thoughts, Michael realized that Roger would not be able to understand the humor of the situation, and he remained silent. A moment later, the lights were lowered; and, after a brief orchestral introduction, the performance began.

The music was a genuine surprise; the composer had shed his chromatic chrysalis, and emerged to shine in glowing melody. Nothing in the music itself bore out the precocity suggested by the title, but with the production of the piece it was different. Delphic columns formed a background, before which the performers passed, clad in scanty drapery. The libretto depicted a story that was enacted during the lowest period of Grecian decadence, and the costumes of the chorus had evidently been designed with the object of suggesting the license of the period. The *prima-donna* alone was decorously swathed in flowing draperies, from which emerged her massive legs, encased in thick, white stockings. The contrast between the music and the setting was almost ludicrous, but the audience did not seem to realize it, and listened with unusual attention, raking the stage with their opera glasses. Michael realized with relief that there was

nothing that was likely to fan into flame the fires of ambition that slept in his heart.

During the burst of applause that marked the end of the first act, Michael found time to look about him. He scanned the rows of faces with idle curiosity, hardly expecting to see any one he knew. But when his eyes rested upon the occupants of a box opposite, and in the tier below, his heart gave a leap. They were two in number, a man of his own age, and a girl whose features he could not clearly discern, but whom he recognized at once by her gestures, which were painfully familiar. Roger had risen, and Michael drew his attention to them.

"Who is that woman over there?" he asked.

"Where? Oh, young Mrs. England—Cicely Wantage that was—a nice girl; they were married quite recently. I met them the other day at the Jamesons. Just back from the honeymoon, poor devils."

"What's he doing? I used to know them when I was in town."

"I haven't the ghost of a notion. I heard at the time that he had pots of money. He is chiefly noted for an aunt of his, so far as I am concerned. She gives rather jolly affairs."

"I don't remember you mentioning her."

"Haven't I? She is a Mrs. Innes. I used to see more of her than I do now. By the way, that reminds me, she asked after you once, I think—when you were lying doggo. She seemed to have taken rather a fancy to you. I suppose you used to go there. But if you know them let's go round."

"Not if I know it," protested Michael, panic-stricken.

"Nonsense—come on."

The resolute attitude of the elder brother prevailed, and Michael found himself following him nervously along the passage towards the Englands' box. He wondered how

Cicely would take his unexpected invasion into her life once more, and he prayed fervently that there might be no scene. He was confident that she had felt his sudden retreat acutely; nevertheless, the fact that she had married augured well. He wished that he had been able to explain matters to Roger, who was pouring a stream of gossip into his heedless ears, but Roger was not easy to confide in. It was impossible to know how he would take a confession; and unless he happened to be in one of his rare moods of sympathy, he was apt to be disconcerting in his outspoken contempt.

As they entered the box, Roger explained Michael's identity, and he was greeted with astonished cries.

“Michael!”

“Lawson!”

There was no scene. Cicely did not even change color, and of the two Michael looked more like the unhappy lover. Cicely persuaded them to stay, and enticed Michael to a chair behind her own.

“What ages it is since I saw you,” she said.

“Yes, isn’t it?” murmured Michael, acutely conscious of the tenor of his farewell letter.

“What are you doing with yourself?” asked England, in a loud voice across the box.

“Oh, I’ve become a Scribe and a Pharisee, or Philistine, rather; I am in Roger’s show—and you?”

“Well, I just mess about, you know. But I’ve found my vocation now it’s too late. I do caricatures. I fairly hit off old Potts. ‘Tow, inflammable,’ I called it; you know his flaxen mop.”

“It keeps him messy and happy,” explained Cicely casting a fond and smiling glance at her husband. “It is quite a gathering of the clans, isn’t it?” she continued, turning to Michael. “It’s like old times, with you and Mr. Potts.” She emphasized the name with a glance, as if to recall the memorable day upon which they first met.

The lights were lowered, and the curtain rose upon the second act. Sitting as he was at the back of the box, Michael could see but little of the stage, and Cicely's slender neck stood silhouetted against the brilliance of the lights below. What a queer place the world was to be sure, and how short was human memory! There was something grotesque in the thought that Cicely, the once broken-hearted, was sitting in front of him, happily mated to another. Glancing across at her husband, Michael wondered whether they would be happy. England was a good enough chap in his way, but apt to be a bore. His fussy and optimistic embarkation upon the occupation of caricaturist was one with a dozen other projects that had preceded it. If he tired so easily of such things, might he not equally well tire of his wife? And yet, obviously they adored each other. Marriages were not made in heaven, it was evident, but were the outcome of chance. A man would be equally happy with any of the half dozen girls with whom he fell in love before he met the one who eventually became his wife. It was an evening of eventful happenings, but they left no sting. Music had lost its charms, at any rate so far as it was represented by the opera that was being performed, and Cicely equally had lost her power of attracting. He felt aloof and detached, as if his companions were strange creatures whose antics he watched with amused criticism. Was it that he was growing less susceptible, and if so, was it the natural complement of maturity? or was he becoming banal and losing his sense of the artistic? In half joking depreciation he had called himself a Philistine. He strongly suspected that the epithet was just, yet he did not regret it, for he felt that his life was saner and of more importance than ever it had been before. Instead of roaming the barren fields of art, he was helping to control a concern, the essential productiveness of which made it of supreme importance. The artistic folk he could see about him lived,

after all, in a Paradise of Fools. They spent their days in chasing their own tails, or else hypocritically applauding the efforts that others made in the same occupation. Art was approached breathlessly and with bended knee but, candidly, it was little more than a toy. How small was the proportion of the population who were able to enjoy and to understand the treasures that were lying in the Picture Galleries! The cultivation of art did little more than pamper a small section of the community; most of whom lived in a fetid atmosphere of artificiality that stank of morbidity. Had his own attempt to become a pianist been crowned with success, it would have meant nothing. It was of little use to call forth melodies that, trembling for a moment in the air, faded into silence and oblivion. No one would deny that the world was a very unsatisfactory place, nor that civilization was a higher state than barbarism. But civilization did not consist in a pretty taste in pastels, nor in belonging to an artistic clique that had achieved the notoriety of a label. Man was a creature of passion, and he should strive to keep his passion healthy, rather than breed debased emotions by subjecting it to exotic restraint. It was far better to walk through rain on the moors, or, for that matter, to work in an office, than to sit stifling yawns in a concert-hall. Better a healthy body than a subtle mind.

Unconscious of the impious thoughts that were stirring in Michael's mind, Cicely turned to draw him into a murmured conversation. Like most women happily married, she found pleasure in experimenting occasionally with emotions she no longer felt. The suspicion that there was a mystery about the last few years of Michael's life piqued her curiosity.

"I can hardly believe it is so long since we met," she said in a low voice. "How many things have happened!"

"Yes, we have both traveled a long way," he answered.

"Do tell me what you have been doing, and why you never have taken the trouble to come and see us?"

"You wouldn't have been best pleased if I had."

"Why ever not?"

"Because you don't cultivate the acquaintance of tramps."

"Oh, bother! What *do* you mean?"

"The old expression! I mean that I was one—yes, seriously," he said, answering a question in her eyes.

"How romantic—do tell me."

"It wasn't romantic at all, only unspeakably wretched."

"I am so sorry—but you will come and see us now?"

Michael paused for a moment before replying.

"Yes," he said at length, and added, with intentional truth, "since we are no longer in love."

"You mustn't say such dreadful things."

"Better a fool with eyes than a blind sage."

"You speak in proverbs."

"And you live in fables."

"Oh, dear, you are too clever for me," she laughed.

"Out of the mouths —"

"I wish you two wouldn't talk so much. I can't see a thing," interposed England in smiling protest.

"You silly thing," answered Cicely, forgetting Michael in a moment.

In the vestibule, while they were trying to make their way through the outpouring crowd, Michael repeated his promise to call upon the Englands.

"We must have a talk over old times," said England sententiously.

Roger seemed to know every one, and as Michael waited while the former stopped to exchange a word with his acquaintances, he felt once more very much the younger brother. A faint sensation of the days when he had been utterly alone oppressed him for a moment, but the door of the taxi in which they drove home seemed to throw a pro-

tecting rampart of prosperity between him and the unfriendly streets, and he sank back upon the cushions with a luxurious feeling of security.

## (II)

When they got back to the flat, Roger poured out for himself a glass of whisky and soda, and settled in an easy-chair for a talk. The two brothers were beginning to get on very well together, now that each had plumbed the other's depths and knew which shoals should be avoided. More often than not, Roger was out in the evenings but, when he returned, instead of seating himself to read for half an hour before turning in, as formerly had been the case, he usually spent the time in discussing the events of the evening, or in retailing any interesting gossip he had heard. To-night, tired with excitement, Michael prepared to go to bed, but Roger detained him.

"Sit down and be sociable," he said.

"What is there to talk about?" asked Michael as a precaution.

"Funny running into that crowd!" mused Roger unheedingly.

Michael grunted, unwilling to commit himself to an observation that might rouse his brother's curiosity.

"Did you know them well?" resumed Roger. "They aren't at all bad."

"I was engaged to Cicely Wantage some years ago," answered Michael, suddenly feeling unable to resist the temptation of throwing such a bomb-shell.

"Great Scott, how damned funny! No wonder you hung fire a bit when I suggested going round to see them. You didn't either of you look very heart-broken though, I must say. Why did it come to an end?"

"I eloped with my portmanteau when my cash ran out."

"What did she say?"

"I didn't wait to hear. She asked me this evening to go round and see her sometime, though," said Michael, as if to vindicate his dignity.

"Are you going?"

"Well, I don't know—it seems rather like flying in the face of Providence, though I can't say I felt very susceptible myself this evening."

"She won't fall in love with you, if that's what you are afraid of. She looked as if she could eat him. You go—it will do you good to know more people, as I have said before."

"I don't know that it applies any longer. I know a fair number of people now, and, really, I get along very well as I am. I no longer avoid people as I used to, but I can't say I crave for them. After being at the office all day, one doesn't feel inclined to gad about, at least I don't. Formerly, when my work was more or less desultory, I used to feel a bit down when I was alone, it is true, but now I have too much to do to think of grousing."

"You are improving in more ways than one," replied Roger. "Why, one would hardly recognize in you the sorney you were six months ago."

With that, Michael went off to bed, hardly knowing whether to feel pleased at the intended compliment, or annoyed at the insult to his former state. He wondered whether he had improved really, or merely fallen more into line with Roger's idea of desirability. Examining himself, he could trace little change beyond the fact that he had found an occupation which kept him both busy and interested. He was still irresolute about visiting Cicely. He was not afraid for himself, but eventualities had to be considered. It might be awkward—there was Joan. Almost unconsciously he was beginning to include Joan in many of his calculations. She was a factor to be counted, although he did not pause to ask why it should be so. Joan and the

future were becoming increasingly mingled. Michael's perturbation, however, was not great enough to keep him awake. Half an hour later, Joan, Cicely, and England were forgotten, and sleep claimed him for her own. Upon his dressing-table was a memorandum scribbled at the last moment before he entered bed, to remind him of a business engagement for the next day.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### DEFLATION

(I)

A WEEK later Roger returned to the attack at breakfast, which he and Michael had together; although the latter, owing to his junior position, had to start for the office some time before Roger.

"It's my belief you will never really be comfortable until you settle down and marry," he said.

On the point of ignoring the advice he had received so often, Michael thought of a counter question that had never before occurred to him.

"How about you? I might say the same," he suggested with some amusement.

"You might, but it would hardly apply with equal force. However, since you are anxious to know, I am going to do so."

"Congraggers; and who is the lady?" asked Michael, half doubting the other's sincerity.

"That little Somerton girl."

"Joan!" gasped Michael.

"Yes, don't jump like a buck-rabbit. She's a very nice little thing, and I think she will do very well."

Notwithstanding his agitation, Michael felt rather shocked at the careless way in which Roger spoke of Joan.

"How do you know she will have you?" he asked, praying that the matter might not have been settled.

"Don't you worry yourself through your skin about that."

"But are you really fond of her? You seem pretty calm about it."

"Fond of her? Yes, of course I am, but you don't expect me to be off my feed, do you?" asked Roger, helping himself to marmalade.

Michael was silent. Then a ray of hope reached him. Perhaps, after all, Roger was only pulling his leg.

"You are growing very secretive. I didn't know you had seen her lately," he said. His relief was short lived.

"I have, all the same. But there was no point in chattering about it. I am going down there this week-end. You don't seem very enthusiastic about it."

"I am not at all sure you will suit each other, to be candid," replied Michael.

"Aren't you? I think it will be all right. She is a good deal younger than I am, but I don't consider that a drawback. I have been thinking things over recently, and I have come to the conclusion that it is my game to marry."

"Well, I hope you will overcome your reserve sufficiently to let me know when the wedding is to be," Michael said, getting up and pushing back his chair. Roger laughed, and picked up the newspaper as Michael left the room.

On the way to the office Michael was lost in thought. His mind was in a turmoil, but despair was fast closing upon him. Why had he delayed when he should have made sure of Joan before it was too late? He was always too late; failure dogged his footsteps. At last he realized with acute pain that he loved Joan; and that, given a few months' grace, he would have asked her to be his wife. "*Heute ist besser als zehn Morgen*," he murmured. His fatal habit of procrastination had betrayed him once more; while accusing Roger of reserve he had been equally secretive himself. He was sure that, had he disclosed his intention, there would have been no difficulty. It was too late now. Roger and Joan—he could not associate the names in his

mind, whereas he felt convinced of the rightness of Joan and Michael. What a wife she would have made! He accused himself of tardiness, but he knew that it had been inevitable. Apart from any other consideration, he could not have asked Joan to be his wife until he could assure comfort for her. He was able to do that now, for he had proved that he would be able, not only to retain his position at the office but to obtain promotion. His worldly position was more promising than previously he had believed possible, and although it would have been necessary to live quietly at first, he would have been able in the near future, at any rate, to keep Joan in the position to which she was accustomed. For a moment he toyed with the idea of seeking out Joan forthwith, and trying to wrest her from Roger. But he realized at once the impossibility of such a step. He was chained to the office, and to endanger his position there would be folly; for, even did he succeed in winning Joan, he would be unable to marry her if he had to take his chance in the open market. Apart from that, he felt that not for a moment could he hope to vie with his successful brother. Roger, more handsome and more assured than himself, would carry everything before him.

When he reached the office Michael tried to forget his disappointment by plunging into his work, but he could not collect his thoughts. In the middle of dictating a letter, he found himself pausing, his mind busy with his own affairs. He pulled himself together, and managed to struggle through the morning's work. After lunch, feeling that he could not face the ordeal of an afternoon of restraint, he pleaded illness and left the building. Instinctively he turned home-wards; but, realizing the uselessness of endeavoring to recover his composure in the flat, he decided to go to Hampstead Heath and boarded an omnibus.

When he reached his destination, he set off at a round pace, as if he was trying to outdistance his thoughts. For

a time he walked with downcast eyes, regardless of his surroundings, but as the physical exercise relieved the tension of his mind he became conscious of them. The Heath was flooded with gold; countless bracken clumps in bloom touched the heights with magic. It was a clear and windy day; overhead the blue sky was flecked with little clouds that fretted into cobweb shadows near the sun. Leaving the road, he passed among the trees, his feet falling silently upon the yielding turf. With newly-awakened eyes he found the spot familiar and recognized in it the scene of long forgotten walks while he was at Hampstead. The incidents of the past came back to him with an aspect of unreality, as if they had taken place in a dream. For the first time he forgot the gnawing pain that had driven him to the spot, and stood re-creating the vanished days. His thoughts led him to Cicely, and thence to Joan. He decided to fulfil the promise he had made to visit the Englands. Bitterly he recognized that there was no longer anything to prevent him. It would serve to divert his thoughts.

On the following Sunday afternoon Michael called at the Englands, and found that they were out of town. Returning to the flat that had become like a prison, he spent the evening reading, but his thoughts wandered. Roger was at the Somertons; perhaps at that very moment he was sitting with Joan, kissing her. The suggestion made Michael wince. He could not imagine a greater grief than his own. He tried to compare his present feelings with those that had followed his final parting from Isobel, but it only made him feel more depressed. His life was like a patchwork quilt, made up of innumerable pieces that bore no relation to each other. In a more poetical mood, he saw it as an April day, whose fugitive splendors were separated by long intervals of unfriendly rain. The evening seemed as if it would never end.

## (II)

Roger on his return was inscrutable.

"Am I to congratulate you?" asked Michael with forced gaiety.

"When I ask you to," was all the reply Roger would vouchsafe, and there for the time the matter ended.

The succeeding days brought a certain measure of relief. When once he was accustomed to the bitterness that possessed him, Michael found that he could keep depression at bay, provided that he had enough with which fully to occupy his time. He fought hard and successfully to avoid betraying by his manner his true feelings, and Roger never suspected them. Now that his younger brother was behaving well, Roger relaxed his vigilance, feeling that it was no longer necessary, and it never for an instant entered his head that there was anything between Michael and Joan. The most trying part of the day for Michael was the evening; when, his work having ended, he was prey to the mood of the moment. He welcomed, therefore, any chances of going out that offered themselves, and accepted without hesitation an invitation to dinner from Cicely.

The result was disappointing. The Englands were alone, and Michael found Cicely entirely lacking enchantment. Her attempts to begin a mock flirtation fell on deaf ears, rather to the disappointment of her husband, who, ignorant of their inner significance, was greatly amused at the idea of old Lawson indulging in such badinage. After dinner England carried out his threat of discussing old times. With a fine disregard of tact, he endeavored to probe the veil with which Michael hid the days following his concert. England did not appear to notice his guest's discomfort and lack of response. With all his youthful enthusiasm he turned to describe complacently his own erratic doings. Michael left at an early hour, and as he walked home, de-

cided that the terrors of loneliness were preferable to such depressing company.

All through the spring the pressure of work at the office continued. Roger swept forward on a flood of prosperity, and Michael was carried at a distance in his wake. To the world Roger was a celebrity as an inventor, the utility of whose devices was witnessed everywhere. But of more practical value was the fact that he was laying the foundation of an immense fortune. Unlike the popular conception of a genius as a dreamer, he had moved with foresight, and had ensured that the first fruits of his labor should be his own. Already he was a rich man, and only his prospective marriage made him remain in the little flat he had taken when first he came to London two years before. By the end of June, it became evident that the imposing block of buildings in Piccadilly would soon be inadequate to house the rapidly increasing staff, and it was decided to decentralize the Company. Rumor, passing among the staff, suggested a dozen different places at which the new branch was likely to be situated, but it was not until July that it was officially announced to be Liverpool. More reserved than ever, since the blow that had fallen on him, Michael paid little attention to the excitement that prevailed. Volunteers for transfer to Liverpool were numerous, for it was considered that the opportunities of promotion would be greater there, but Michael was not among them. His own post suited him well enough, and he cared little what happened to him, so long as he was left in peace. His value had not escaped the eyes of authority, however, and one morning Mr. Collingwood entered Michael's room, and sat on the edge of the table.

"How would you like to go to Liverpool?" he asked, without preliminaries.

"Well, really, I haven't considered the idea," replied Michael frankly.

“It would be a good thing for you, though I should be sorry to lose you.”

“I must own that I am contented where I am.”

“But if you were put in charge of the new offices?”

It was a dazzling suggestion, and for a moment Michael paused to consider it.

“I doubt if I could manage it,” he said at length.

“Nonsense, my dear fellow, I am sure you could. If you were in any difficulty you could always ring through to me. There is not another man in the office who wouldn’t jump at it; but you are the man we want, and I won’t hear of your refusing it.”

“You are very good, but I should like to think it over, if I may,” said Michael, who was not impervious to the other’s compliment.

“Very well, but ask your brother about it, and see if he doesn’t agree with me.”

Roger knew all about the proposed transfer, and his arguments convinced Michael that he could not afford to lose such an opportunity. In a fortnight it was settled that he should take over his new duties in September, after his holiday; but there was a great deal to be done before then, and frequently he had to travel down to Liverpool to superintend the arrangement of the offices, or to deal with the innumerable details inseparable from a new undertaking. Flattered as he was by the importance of his new post, he felt doubtful of the wisdom of accepting it. He told himself that he always met Fortune down the wrong turning; and consequently, when he did so, was apt to flout her. That he should be uprooted from the life in which he was just beginning to feel at home was trying, but, as things stood, he was not sorry to sever his connection with Roger. Life at the flat would have been intolerable when his brother became the acknowledged *fiancé* of Joan. Although his work would keep him in touch with many of his companions

at the office, he could not help feeling that once more he was turning his back on all that made existence tolerable. He dreaded lest, without Roger to guide and encourage him, he should prove himself unable to cope with the responsibility placed upon him. He began to look upon the two months that remained between him and his new life as a precious respite that passed all too quickly. He was pledged to spend August at Windecote, but he determined that if possible he would avoid going there. It would be too severe a trial to see Joan and Roger in their happiness.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### JOAN DISPOSES

#### (I)

THROUGHOUT the early summer, Roger followed Joan from place to place, for Mrs. Somerton seldom stayed anywhere for long, but preferred leisurely to make her way from one quiet watering-place to another, and Joan went with her. To almost every small coast-town between Cromer and Seaview, Roger traveled, arriving on Friday evenings at the place where they were then staying, and returning to town on the following Sunday. He became familiar with many roads as his motor carried him through the blinding sunlight or the windy downpours of an English summer. But he wasted little time in admiration of the country through which he passed; intent upon the purpose of the moment, he made no pretension of being a lover of nature. In naming him inscrutable, Michael did not exaggerate, for while he was neither hero nor villain, Roger had learned the wisdom of silence. He traveled alone and shunned the chance acquaintances he met at the inns at which he stopped for lunch. Michael, consumed by jealousy in London, he thought of no more than the downs he traversed, bright with bracken or the paler primrose. At his journey's end, Mrs. Somerton and Joan welcomed him warmly, at first because he was Rosie's brother, but, as the time passed, because they began to look upon him as a natural adjunct to the week-end, whose absence created a definite gap. From the couch upon which she lay in her private sitting-room, Mrs. Somerton had watched him with speculative eyes, until his independent manner disarmed the suspicion she had that he meant to take Joan away from

her. Not that she would have offered opposition had he avowed his desire to marry Joan, for he would have been an eminently desirable suitor from a worldly point of view. She soon ceased to regard him as such. He became a friend who helped to make the hours pass more quickly when he was present, but for whom she felt no very warm regard.

When, in May, Roger's visits became regular, Joan accused him of neglecting Rosie.

"She doesn't want me," he assured her. "She has a great scheme on hand by which she is going to make Windecote a perfect paradise, and she wants it to be a surprise for us in August. If I went there it would spoil the fun of the thing."

There was some truth in this, although the idea had been Roger's in the first place, and Rosie had only adopted it in deference to his request.

"She must be very lonely," said Joan, to whom the idea of living in such an isolated spot as Windecote was rather terrifying.

"Not she. But, as it happens, I shall be seeing her next week, as she is coming up to town, and I shan't be able to get down here."

"We shall miss you," murmured Mrs. Somerton.

"I shall come again, never fear," said Roger laughing, as he glanced at Joan.

She did not notice his look, and asked how Michael was getting on.

"He is quite the man about town now, and what's more, he is going to be an important person," Roger answered, and he proceeded to relate the proposed scheme for Michael's promotion, which was still in embryo and had not been made known to its object.

"He never writes now, the dreadful boy," complained Joan.

"Dreadn't be? I never knew he used to, or I would have kept him up to the mark."

"Kraie is the only one who takes the trouble to write to you to trouble me."

"If you feel it so much, I will too."

"Oh, no, it wouldn't be worth it when you are always coming down," said Joan, who suspected Roger's confident placid as little as did her mother.

Two months passed, without Roger making any apparent progress. He knew quite well that Joan cared for him only as an acquaintance whom familiarity had raised to the rank of friend, and he hesitated to declare his purpose until he was sure of immediate success. Joan was so disarmingly a comrade merely, and his own feeling was so free from passion that he would have found the attempt to win a more intimate footing difficult. His short visits became a habit, and one that was so pleasant that he disliked the idea of placing them upon a new standing. Nothing, indeed, except a mistaken sense of his duty to himself urged him to do so; but at length, when he saw that the summer was in danger of passing completely without his resolve having been fulfilled, he decided that the time for action had come.

One Sunday evening at Eastbourne, he persuaded Joan to sit with him in the garden of the hotel. Below them the Channel gleamed in the moonlight, and the faintly acrid sea-breeze mingled with the rich scent of flowers that lingered in the warm night air. It was exceedingly quiet, and the lights of the town beneath seemed to add to the peacefulness of the silent garden. As they paced to and fro upon the lawn, the light of the cigar that Roger was smoking glowed and faded in the darkness.

"Don't you think that an evening like this makes one feel dreadfully good?" asked Joan, breaking a long silence.

A sudden feeling that the hour had come made Roger ignore her question.

"Look here, how long is this to go on?" he asked abruptly.

"What to go on?" Joan was at a loss.

"This foolery of ours. Joan, you know that I'm fond of you. Surely it is time to stop pretense."

He took her by the arm, and made her face him.

"Suppose you give me a kiss to seal the bargain?" he suggested.

Making no attempt to release herself, Joan looked at him with troubled eyes.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"That you are going to marry me, of course."

"Oh, Roger, I'm so sorry for this! I couldn't—I couldn't, really."

"Rubbish! Of course you can," he said easily.

"No." Her answer was convinced, and she released her arm from his hold. They turned once more to continue their walk.

"Why not?" asked Roger, after a pause to consider her reply.

"You see, I'm fond of some one else." Joan was rosy in the darkness.

"The deuce you are! Who is it? I mean, do I know him?"

"Yes, you know him." And, with a strange choice of confidant, she added in a low voice, "But he doesn't care for me a scrap."

"I'm sorry," he answered seriously. The irony of the situation did not strike him.

Now that the long strain of bearing her secret in silence was ended, Joan's resistance broke down. With a little sob, she fell weeping. The gentle sadness of the tranquil night added to her feeling of heart-broken sorrow, and she endeavored in vain to control herself.

"Cheer up! It will be all right; I'm sure it will," Roger

assured her, trying clumsily to comfort her. He took her in his arms, and, like a child full of sorrow, willingly she came to hide her face against him. It was an unforeseen ending, but pity alone was in his eyes as he looked at her.

When they returned to the house, Mrs. Somerton suspected nothing of the scene that had taken place beneath her window, and Roger left for town next day as if nothing had occurred. His moment of sentiment had passed. Joan was a bad debt. He wrote her off, and considered the incident closed. He smiled as he thought how lucky it was that he was not in the toils of an infatuation—then it would have been unfortunate. He felt more than ever convinced that he was wise in keeping such matters upon a strictly practical basis. When he left the Somertons, he promised to return in a couple of weeks, but excuses were easy to find, and he did not intend to go. Life was too short to waste in sentiment. He dismissed the subject from his mind, and began to consider the details of a new silencer for his motor, with which he was experimenting. It was ingenious, and would reduce the loss of power to a minimum.

When Roger reached the flat, Michael was in bed, unconscious of the news that awaited him. But at breakfast next morning he eyed Roger, as if expecting that his recent meeting with Joan would have left a trace upon him—a shining lustre. For a time they sat in silence, and Roger read the newspaper, which he had propped against the coffee-pot.

"Any news?" asked Michael, gloomily.

"Yes," replied his brother, without looking up. "You will be pleased to hear that Joan will have none of me."

"What!" cried Michael, scarcely able to moderate his voice.

"She is after another bird, so you and your eugenics go up one."

"Who is it?" Michael's heart fluttered painfully.

"God knows!—some one I've met, though—so she says."

Michael's hand trembled so violently that he nearly spilt his coffee. He assumed a lugubrious expression, and sought for consoling phrases.

"Bad luck," was all he could muster.

"Oh, I'm doing well."

"It's rotten."

"I'm sorry in a way, of course, but there are other fish in the sea. On the whole, I'm not sure that you weren't right. She hasn't enough presence. She's too self-effacing."

Michael was silent, and lost the opportunity to confess. His own sensitiveness made him wrongly suppose that Roger felt his disappointment more keenly than he admitted. When he finished breakfast he had an uncomfortable feeling that he ought to walk about on tiptoe, as if he was in a sick-room, but, feeling that it would be more tactful to behave as if nothing had occurred, he made, if anything, rather more noise than usual in leaving the room. Once in the passage, he dived into his bedroom to allow the tumult in his breast to subside. Optimism once more took possession of him. Joan was fond of a friend of Roger's—who could it be but himself? "She's fond of me," he said, and began to jig about the room. While indulging in mad capers, he murmured inane phrases, "My shy bird—my Joan-poppet," rolling the words upon his tongue as if they were fine wine. A sudden dread seized him. Suppose it were some one else? For a moment he felt cold, but his heart was too high, long to admit of a check to its exulting. And, when he left the flat, he ignored the lift, and raced down the stairs to work off his excitement.

## (II)

Optimism is a quality rooted far more deeply than despair in the average person. Doubt and dread come but as inci-

dents upon an unending background of hope. But hope does not necessarily mean joy, for very often it is painful. "Only let me know the worst," cries the victim of uncertainty, unable to bear the longing in his heart. The smallest incident favorable to his desire is magnified a hundred-fold, strive how he may to be unbiased, until it becomes seen as the first impulse of the turning tide of fortune. Loath to acknowledge the signs of misfortune, he invents specious and subtle quibbles by which he makes them appear favorable omens.

Although Michael told himself that he had scanty grounds for rejoicing, it was with difficulty that he restrained his soaring hopes. Life once more became a fine thing, and fortune a kindly dame. He began to enter with zest into the preparations for his departure, and discovered that a new factor had entered the situation. At Liverpool he would be further from Joan than he was in London, and he would stand less chance of seeing her. In time almost every one came to London; to await them merely required patience, but comparatively few people passed through Liverpool. His only chance lay in winning her before she passed beyond his reach, but he felt that he could take no action while Roger's wound was so raw. Had Michael known it, Roger had taken his blow lightly. He made no effort to disguise the fact that his rejection by Joan was no more than an annoying error in his calculations. But Michael refused to believe it. Roger's forbearance and kindness had won his heart, and he imagined that, beneath a careless exterior, his brother concealed a nature almost as emotional as his own. A deadlock resulted, which Roger would speedily have ended had he suspected it.

Towards the end of July, Rosie came to town. She had many purchases to make before Windecote was invaded the following month by its promised visitors, and she arranged to stay for a week with an old school-friend who was mar-

ried and lived in a flat overlooking Regent's Park. Joan had not mentioned the scene in the garden at Eastbourne, but Rosie was not long in finding out what had happened; and, recognizing the genuineness of Roger's attitude, she lavished no pity upon him. One afternoon she came over to tea at the flat in Knightsbridge; and, as Roger was detained in the city, she and Michael had an hour to themselves.

The conversation soon came round to Roger.

"I can't help feeling that it was just as well Joan acted as she did, because I really don't think he was very fond of her," said Rosie.

"Don't you?" asked Michael, but he was too confident that his own estimate of Roger was correct to feel elated. "He is very off-hand about it, but I fancy he feels it more than he says."

"Well, time will show," Rosie replied, not caring to contradict his defense of Roger.

To discuss Joan was a delight that Michael rarely enjoyed, but it was not unmixed with gall. He had a task to perform that was extremely difficult, for he was afraid of betraying himself. He would have wished for no better confidant than Rosie, but he fancied that it was too soon to disclose his feelings. For a time he led up to the question he wished to ask, but when an opportunity offered he shirked it and hastily led the conversation to safer ground. He eyed the clock, fearful lest Roger should return before he had carried out his intention, but, try as he would, he could not summon sufficient courage. Despairing of seeing Roger, whose hours were erratic, Rosie at length prepared to leave. Moistening his dry lips, Michael rushed the situation.

"Who is the other man?" he asked, guessing that in all probability Rosie would be able to set his doubts at rest.

"What other man?" she asked, for a moment at a loss.

"The other man Joan was fond of."

"I expect it is a secret, or she would have said herself who it was. But why do you want to know?"

"I only wondered," said Michael, laughing, but sick with disappointment at the way in which his question had been parried.

Ostentatiously buttoning her gloves, Rosie sat down again.

"I used to think at one time that you were rather fond of Joan," she said in an off-hand tone.

"I?" Michael faltered, blushing furiously and praying that Rosie would not detect him. But Rosie was sharper than he suspected, and was watching him in the mirror over the sideboard.

"Yes, you," she said emphatically, turning round and confronting him.

"You were right," he said huskily. He realized that it was idle to prevaricate when his face would contradict his words.

"Oh, Michael, you silly boy. Why ever didn't you say so sooner? What a dreadful mess you have made of things," cried Rosie, abandoning guile.

"What could I do?" he asked helplessly. "If she had been fond of me it would have been different, but, as things were, Roger had just as much right to try his luck as I had, and now I can't very well step in where he failed—there is the other man too," he added, taking an unfair advantage of his soft-hearted sister. But Rosie was too loyal to betray a confidence, even if by doing so she could make her favorite brother happy. She sought for a way of unravelling the tangle. It seemed so absurdly simple; and yet what could be done?

"You are too Quixotic—Roger wouldn't mind," she said. "You must try, if only for my sake. Think how I should love to have Joan as a sister. Now, will you promise?"

"Of course, I should like to," Michael answered doubtfully. Rosie saw that the day was as good as won.

"You silly old thing. Of course it will all come right; it must," she said, almost crying as she smiled encouragement. Poor Michael, he set out so gaily to scale mountains and failed undaunted, but the smallest mole-hill scared him.

As the lift carried Rosie downwards, Michael leaned over the banisters.

"I shall wait till we are at Windecote," he called. Too far away to reply, Rosie waved her hand and smiled up at him.

Rosie's encouragement gave Michael the stimulus he needed, although she had failed to quiet his doubts. The fluttering hopes that formerly he endeavored to chain soared unrestricted. When Roger returned he noticed the difference in Michael's manner.

"You seem pretty bobbish," he remarked.

"Well, it's such a jolly evening."

"Do you think so? I found it pretty wet."

"Rosie has been here, I mean."

"Ah," murmured Roger reflectively. He looked very knowing, and decided that Michael had been suffering from a prolonged liver-attack from which he had just recovered. It would do him good to get away from London.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### EXIT THE HERO

(I)

IT was not astonishing that, occupied as he had been, Michael scarcely noticed the flight of time. May passed with her flowers, and June, without luring him from town except when he traveled to Liverpool on business. That year the best of the seasons was wasted for him, and the only indications of summer he observed were the long sultry evenings when clothes seemed an insupportable burden, and for a few weeks the fruit-hawkers with their barrows piled high with strawberries. Now and then, the rare and bright air of the summer mornings filled him with new vigor as he walked to the station, but the stuffiness of the smoking carriages in the Tube speedily enervated him, so that, when he reached the office, the brilliance of the day meant nothing to him, except that it would be more than usually trying to work in the rooms to which no vagrant breeze seemed to stray. The finer the day was, the more irritable were the staff. Michael was no exception. At such times he noticed with deep disgust the large numbers of foreigners who were to be seen. Little stumpy men with short fat hands seemed to fill every seat in the trains, and Americans long-footed and dressed in square-cut clothes stood at every corner raising their round felt hats. The only time he felt really at ease was when he sat whistling shrilly in his bath.

It was not until a chance remark, made one evening when he was dining with some friends of Roger's, revealed the fact that the girl who was sitting next to him knew the

country round Windecote that the nearness of his holiday came home to him. As he described the house to his neighbor, the incidents of the previous summer came back to him with vivid appeal. The idle days he spent there seemed the happiest period of his life. Forgetting the depression that had weighed so heavily upon him, he remembered innumerable jolly incidents. The girl to whom he was speaking was still young enough to look forward to going to the sea. For her, it represented unlimited tennis, golf, and bathing; a period when parental vigilance slept in a deck-chair, and idle evenings spent with "nice boys" opened vistas of delightful emotions. To Michael it represented rest, unrestrained liberty, and Joan. He pictured Rosie at the dinner-table; and afterwards a chair in the orchard, in which to sit while his pipe glowed in the velvety dusk; long days in which the sun and the crisp dry air from the sea would envelop him. He felt sorry when his companion left, and thought that seldom had he met a more interesting girl. Altogether he found the evening unusually enjoyable.

During the rest of the week, Michael's mind constantly recurred to Windecote. He began to find his work irksome, and London oppressive. He irritated Roger by spending an evening in fidgeting with Bradshaw and making tempting plans for the holidays. An urgent need for the country awoke in him; and, considering the holidays too far off, he decided to spend the following Sunday out of town. Unused to such excursions, he was at a loss to decide where he should go. Roger's random suggestion of Brighton or Folkestone did not appeal to him, and he was unwilling to forestall future delights by spending the week-end with Rosie. At length he remembered Sempervale, and determined that he would visit the Hargrieves. Not only did the country about there seem just what he wanted, but he was anxious to discover how he would feel upon visiting the scenes that were so intimately associated with Isobel. He

had ghosts to lay, but he was not sure enough of himself to view with equanimity the prospect of meeting Isobel again. She had been married for several years, however, and the chance of finding her with her parents was small. After slight hesitation, he wrote to Mr. Hargrieves to announce his intention of calling at the Vicarage for tea.

## (II)

When once the resolution was taken, Michael was astonished to find how little it worried him, he was more curious to see Sempervale and his old surroundings than to hear about Isobel; as if suddenly awakened from a dream, he found that she was no longer a reality. When Sunday came, and he was in the train, he forced himself deliberately to think about the times he had spent with her, but they had lost their focus, and he was able no longer to recall even her face. It seemed only a few days since she had been a vital presence to him, but since then something had happened to make him miraculously much older. For a moment, he was on the point of getting up to look at himself in the mirror above the opposite seat in the compartment to see what this new self of his looked like. He felt just the same as he seemed to have done ever since he could remember; was it possible that his face had changed, that an indefinite something had altered its expression, and that his body had become solid and mature like those of the men with whom he mixed? It seemed incredible; yet he had an eerie suspicion that Time had caught him unawares and prodded him with a lean forefinger to try his condition, and that if he was not careful Death before long would mark him out as ripening for his purpose.

It was not until Michael reached the Vicarage, and began to walk up the drive that he felt he had been rash to come. He became mortally afraid of finding Isobel staying at her old home, and fancied that it would be just his luck if she

was. He rang the bell, and when he heard it peal loudly within the silent house he felt that it was the knell of his happiness tolling. It seemed an interminable time before he heard the familiar sound of footsteps upon the tiles in the hall. In a few minutes he was ushered into the study, where the Vicar was sitting by the open French-windows that gave out upon the shady garden. The tall tutor of Michael's boyhood appeared strangely shrunk and aged, and for a moment, it was difficult to reconcile memory with the reality. In the tones of Mr. Hargrieves' still resonant voice, Michael found a link with the past. It was some years since he had seen the Vicar, but it was difficult to account for the change that had come over him. When he heard that Mrs. Hargrieves had died the year before, he guessed that sorrow was responsible for the stricken look upon her husband's face. Michael heard the tidings with a sensation of loss that was strange, considering how small a part the dead woman had played in his life. It had always been Isobel and the Vicar who had loomed in his memory, but the figures who were associated with a cherished time themselves became endeared, and he felt that he had been genuinely fond of her who had first mentioned Isobel's name to him.

After tea the Vicar took Michael out to see the garden. It was the only relaxation left to the old man, and he loitered lovingly among the flowers, describing the care with which he had tended them, and his hopes and fears for the following year. They talked in a desultory way of the past and the present, but the Vicar's attention was only half given to the conversation. He would pause in the middle of a sentence in order to pluck a withered flower; at other times a distant look in his eyes would show that he had lost the thread of the discussion. Speaking at random, he would dive into the pockets of his jacket and produce a pair of scissors, a piece of twine, or a small staple, and correct a

wayward shoot. Once he startled Michael by diving in front of his feet to grub up a weed which he had detected on the path. But his wandering attention could not give any offense; he returned to the subject with an air of such humble contrition that it was difficult to refrain from smiling at him.

It was not until they had completed a circuit of the garden, and were returning across the lawn, that the Vicar's conversation became consecutive. Michael seized the opportunity to broach the subject that had been on the tip of his tongue since he entered the Vicarage.

"I hope Isobel is quite fit?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so," answered the Vicar. "When I last heard from her, she was in Switzerland, but she doesn't write very often. She has a great deal with which to occupy her time now. Of course you know her husband by name?"

"No," replied Michael, "and please don't think me very extraordinary, when I say that I would rather you didn't tell me."

The Vicar peered at him curiously; then, perhaps guessing that of which he had been ignorant for so many years, he said, "No. I don't. My dear boy, I think I understand. We all have things we do not care to discuss."

After a time he looked at his watch. "I hope you will forgive me," he said, "but I shall have to leave you soon, as it is getting near the time for evensong—unless you would care to come too? I have a curate now, a dear fellow, who relieves me of much of the work; but I always like to be present during service. One must set a good example, you know," he added with a twinkle in his kind eyes.

"It is quite time for me to think about leaving, myself. I think I shall walk back to Chesham; and I must hurry, or I shall get caught by the dark."

"In that case I won't press you to stay; but I hope you

will come over another day and have a little supper before you leave. I hope you will come to church too; it's a nice old place and, you know, it's a pity to give up going—though perhaps you haven't."

"I'm afraid I have rather," answered Michael, "but I don't pose as a sceptic or anything foolish. What I feel is that if one knows what is wrong and tries to lead a straight life, there is little more to be said."

"If one only knew! It is the little things that are so hard to understand. But there can be no doubt about belief." The Vicar leaned thoughtfully upon his stick, and noticed absently that there were signs of blight on a *William Allen Richardson*. He settled his spectacles, and stooped to examine it more carefully. Then, straightening himself to say good-bye he took up the thread of the conversation again.

"I want you to consider me speaking as a friend, and not as a clergyman when I tell you, Michael, that your attitude is wrong. Life is far more important than any of us guess. It has been said that men turn to religion in order to shirk responsibility for their actions, and because they lack the courage to face the results of thought. But I believe in my Faith because something tells me, as it tells you and every one else who does not shut his ears, that there is a guerdon for sorrow bravely met, and because I know that every glory of this glorious world has an inner significance."

### (III)

As Michael passed homewards through the countryside, the Vicar's words rose and fell in his ears. In vain he strove to find in himself a trace of the same confidence. "All is for the best in this best of all possible worlds," he murmured, and envied Dr. Pangloss and the Vicar their optimism. He felt that there was, and always had been, an influence to direct men's lives, but no sooner did he apply

this belief to any individual creed than he felt uncertain. The idea of a future existence as an individual entity was beyond his grasp, and he felt no wish for it. The flowers sprang into existence year after year, and men lived again in posterity, but that their bodies should rise from the dust to face fresh sorrow, or new delight, was not only incredible, but undesirable. Let him be buried deep in the earth, and if from his mouldering flesh the grass and the wild flowers sprang more sweetly, it was enough. He felt sorrowful, and his heart ached with indefinite longing.

His thoughts returned to the Vicarage and its lonely occupant. Almost with a shock, he realized that Mr. Hargrieves was in a way profoundly happy, notwithstanding his misfortune. That he had suffered from his wife's death was obvious, as also was the fact that the realization of her absence came home to him in almost everything he did. But it had not robbed him of his tranquillity, nor did it prevent him taking pleasure in a hundred peaceful occupations. What could be the secret of his peace of mind? Michael himself had suffered in his own way, but suffering had not brought him any balm; surely the answer was that his old tutor had something more than himself upon which to rely. He had his Faith; and he realized the value of it.

That was the leading factor, but there were others. It could not be simplicity of intellect that made the Vicar take pleasure in such trivial things as the cultivation and tending of a few very ordinary flowers, it must be that old age itself had brought him a measure of happiness. Old age, whose coming was awaited with dread, was after all no unmixed evil, for did it not bring with it release from bodily unrest, from the fevers and doubts of youth? The grandfather with his spy-glass was surely more to be envied than the son with his magnifying lens, for the former did not distort things and make its owner sweat with terror at the sight of what was in reality a trifle. It was clear then that Faith

and old age were to be envied, but one other thing was wanting. Flowers were all very well in the daytime, but they were useless in the evenings when dim eyes could not see to read even seedsmen's catalogues, nor in the long nights when old hearts lay beating in beds unvisited by sleep. Faith was for the present and the future, but only memory could provide for the past. Idle evenings and sleepless nights would be of little moment when the hours were beguiled by fragrant memories. Time with his file can smooth the surface, but is powerless to touch the inmost graining; it is only those lives which have justified themselves that can be re-lived in memory without causing the heart to ache.

Michael asked himself what he had done to justify the life that had been given to him. As he looked back along the years, he saw nothing but a series of false starts from which he had derived discouragement rather than experience. He did not blame himself, for he saw that the blame was not his own. It was the passion of his age for civilization, its senseless craving for cultivation, that was responsible. Formerly, men had lived a rougher but a saner life. If religion was the aim of existence, civilization was harmful, for they were not compatible. As refinement spread, the cry for democracy grew more insistent, until eventually the world became so democratic that it could not brook the authority of a dogma. He felt that Thought, and the striving after Truth, was useless; it was better to swim with the tide, but to swim straight. People had become finicking and unduly cautious, so cautious that they did not dare leap in the dark, for fear of jumping to a mistaken conclusion. Cicely, Isobel, Strickland; where were they going? They did not know, and whatever they might think, they were quite without use. So important in their own eyes, their absence would leave no gap, they were utterly insignificant. Each one was alone in unbroken silence, and it was this

silence and isolation that was so terrible. The only way to escape being crushed by it, was by seeking out a companion in whom it could be forgotten for a time.

When Michael awoke from his reverie, he found that his path was leading him towards the low and wooded hills. Below him in the valley he could hear the bells of a village church pealing. Their stumbling, hurrying notes had an air of careless and childlike gaiety that was touching. Pausing for a moment, he turned to look at the cottages half-hidden by the trees among which they lay. The bells with their peaceful message won their way to his heart, and with a smile that was half scornful he envied what seemed to him the simplicity of those to whom they beckoned not in vain. Men and women, girls and boys, living lives of varying vice were flocking to church; there to be absolved, there to meditate fresh idleness and sin. Impelled by the ache in his heart, he descended the hill; and, as the hour struck and the bells fell silent, he entered the church and sat upon a chair at the foot of the nave, among the children who chose such seats in order that they might be less easily observed.

Michael's first feeling of critical uncertainty gradually left him, and the low voice of the clergyman who read the lesson cast a spell of restfulness upon him. Scarcely following the words, he found the music of their cadences soothing in itself. The peaceful scene affected him more than its purpose, and during the sermon a sensation of mental rest came to him as he sat vacantly watching the light of low sun that streamed through the west door, touching with soft gold all that lay in its path. While the blessing was given he sat with head on hands, feeling as if he had been spirited to some quiet haven far from all strife and sorrow.

When he regained the hills it was growing late, and the village was indistinct, wrapped in a faint veil of mist. He

walked quickly in order that he might reach the main-road before darkness hindered him in finding his way across the fields. He seemed to have passed through a purifying influence and, purged from unrest, his spirit drew together the past and the future. The days before him had lost their shadows, and lay like a fine highway through pleasant places. He had won tranquillity of heart, and, still unsolved, the problems of life faded into insignificance. Before him was holiday, and days that he would live to the utmost; very near lay Windecote and Joan.





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